LEONID SERGEYEV

MORNING TRAMS

Raduga Publishers · Moscow

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STORIES ABOUT CHILDHOOD

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Translated from the Russian by *Janet Butler*
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УТРЕННИЕ ТРАМВАИ

РАССКАЗЫ О ДЕТСТВЕ

На английском языке

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Our Small Town

By Way of a Foreword

In the place where I spent my childhood all the colours were brighter and all the smells stronger than anywhere else. Even the sky was deeper and clearer. Running away from my aunt, climbing trees, tossing pebbles across water—that's when I felt happy. And I only felt sad when I lost a penknife or my bicycle broke.

My early childhood before the war was spent on the edge of a small town, in a narrow street with lamps which we were always smashing so that we could play hide-and-seek in the dark. There were poplars in front of all the houses and when they were in bloom, fluff used to fly along the street, sticking to fences, and drifting into ditches like snow. We used to throw matches into the ditches, setting the fluff alight and the flame would run along the hollows like a fuse.

In front of our house, however, there were birches, and the branches of a particularly tall one rested on our roof and stretched across the street. You could climb onto the roof from it and fly kites or shoot arrows from a bow or simply settle down in them and watch the street below. From up in the birch you had a good view of the cobblestones, shimmering like scales in the rain, the branchy poplars by the roadside and the two-storey wooden houses with front gardens and sheds. Right before your eyes was the

house opposite where Uncle Fedya, a driver, lived on the ground floor, and my uncle, my mother's brother, who was an artist, lived in the attic. You could clearly see my granny's house at the end of the street and the windows of my friend, Bob Vermisheliev, in a nearby lane.

And if you climbed even higher, you could see the compressor factory where my father worked, the school, the swings in Gorky Park, the stadium's flags and the church at the cemetery. And from the very top you caught a glimpse of the whole of our small town with its white-stone, four-storey houses in the new district, and tramline running from the bakery to the technical college on the opposite edge of the town where you could just make out the dam, swathed in mist, and farther still, the gleaming slope down to the river.

One day as I was climbing up and down the tree for want of anything better to do, our neighbour, old Kirillina, stomped about the garden, muttering, "That little scallywag don't give nobody no peace!", and then threatened to tell my father about my antics.

The upshot of it all was that my mother came and started ticking me off. At that moment a rather tipsy man in a leather jacket passed by and remarked, "If you ask me, he's a fine lad! Tip-top!", and winked at me as if encouraging me to get up to more mischief.

"What a splendid fellow," I thought to myself. It was Uncle Fedya. He had only just moved into our street.

Uncle Fedya loved betting on anything under the sun and with anyone at hand. He used to bet children badges, the girls a cake, the lads a pint of beer, my uncle a bottle of vodka and my granny a quarter pound of sweets.

Next door to Uncle Fedya lived a professor of medicine with curly reddish-brown hair and reddish-brown eyes. He always carried a yellow briefcase with him. Every morning he would cram it full of books and set off for his clinic and every time he caught me staring at his leather treasure-trove, he would nod, "Yes, yes, it holds lots of books."

He took me for a keen book collector whereas, in fact, at that moment I was wondering how many catapults I could make out of the briefcase's leather. He called all children

"dearies" but his descriptions of grown-ups depended on the impression they made on him. After chatting to someone for a while, he would at once attach a label to him such as "a fine person" or "a superb person". He called my uncle "an odd fellow", Uncle Fedya "a coarse individual" and my father "a wonderful man". On Sundays the professor and my father used to play chess in his garden. I usually stood close-by and whispered advice. And every time I did, the professor would laugh noiselessly, puffing out his cheeks and wrinkling the skin around his eyes, and say gently, "Don't prompt me, dearie, as it is, everything's as clear as a summer's day!" Sometimes Kirillina would get into a squabble with some woman or other in the street and the professor would sigh and say, "High jinks! What our girls will get up to!" Then he would go up to the fence and ask the wrangling women to speak a little more quietly.

Next to granny's house at the end of the street lived a former property owner, a tall man with sharp, quick movements and a scornful sneer on his face. He had a rapid gait and would stride along as if measuring out the street. What's more, he always wore dark glasses so as "not to see all the disgraceful goings-on". He did not even take them off when he was speaking to someone. It seemed to me that he hid his eyes because he had a guilty conscience.

One day as he was striding past the professor's house like a pair of compasses, the latter called out "good morning" to him.

"What's so good about it!" the property owner hurled back. "I don't remember a good day these past twenty years!" And off he strode.

"What a slippery fellow," remarked the professor, shaking his head.

There were so many eglantine bushes growing in the property owner's garden that some sprawled out into the street. Their flowers were a complete menace, for beetles from all around were attracted by their fragrance and in late summer their hips would simply fall to the ground.

One day Tanya, a girl from a nearby lane, and I were picking rosehips in front of the fence when suddenly out of the corner of my eye I became aware of someone's chilling stare.

"Hey you! Stop pulling those hips off!" the property owner ordered Tanya and wagging his finger threateningly at me, added, "And don't you break the bushes!" And then he walked away from the fence, muttering, "Blighters they are, not children!"

Sometimes the property owner would put on a black-and-grey striped suit and go for a walk along our street. This meant that he was particularly out of sorts. Walking past the houses on such days, he would always shout at Uncle Kolya the cobbler and let rip at little boys. But there were other days when the muffled sounds of piano music rang out from his room. The cascading sounds seemed to gush through the windows and down the street and fade away somewhere in the distance. If it was a cheerful tune, in my mind's eye I would see a fair with noisy side-shows, and if it was sad, I would imagine mysterious far-off lands. At such moment all my troubles seemed to vanish and I felt that there was indeed something more to life than met the eye. Listening to these magic sounds, I could not understand how a person could be both talented and bad. Before I had thought that only good people could play like that but now it appeared that a good musician could be not only a boor but also a villain.

The property owner could not stand anyone singing out of tune. If he heard someone doing so, he would cringe and stuff his fingers in his ears. Catching wind of this, we purposely sang cat choruses outside his windows, trying to go off-key, which was not very hard because we did not have an ear for music anyway.

The property owner had lots of old paintings in gilt frames. He considered himself a connoisseur of "true" art and did not take my uncle's work seriously. One day I drew our birch in the front garden, copying each of its boughs in the minutest detail. I put my heart and soul into it but when I showed it to my uncle, he scowled and said, "That's very bad. Completely dead. There's no lightness, no atmosphere in it. Every work's got to have a mood to it but yours doesn't. Well, here we have a birch. But so what? It's got to stir your feelings. Inflict its mood upon you. Well, I mean, make you sad or happy. I don't know, if I was in your shoes,

I'd take up something else. I doubt you'll make an artist."

I was not disheartened by my uncle's sharp criticism because I imagined he looked upon me as a dangerous rival. I took my drawing to the property owner who greeted me in an unexpectedly courteous manner, attentively examined the drawing, showed me his paintings and told me in great detail about the old masters. He did so eloquently and his voice sounded warm and even tender. Then he led me out onto the porch and said confidingly, "Remember the main thing: you're an artist! You must portray everything better than it is in real life. I mean, knock out everything superfluous and ugly and draw in the way you want to see things. Yes, how you want to and not how you actually do!" And then he spat.

Forestalling events, I'll say here and now that the property owner and old Kirillina were the only bad people in my childhood. It's always easier to criticise the bad things than praise the good. Even so, there were far more good people in our street than bad ones.

The House Behind the Birches or the Rooms Full of Sunlight

We lived in a two-storey timber-frame house. The corridor downstairs had small columns with cracked carvings, a low storey between the two floors which was on the verge of collapse, and a spiral staircase leading upstairs. Under the staircase there were store-rooms and a glazed veranda cluttered with various junk. Our front door was made of badly fitting planks and locked on a latch while our back door was embellished with stained-glass panels and English locks. Architecturally, the ground floor was a complete disaster although it did have one saving grace—sunny windows. In the morning the sun heated up the living rooms and in the afternoon lit up the dusty veranda, glowed through the

stained-glass panels and played in the kitchen utensils.

As a child, I measured grown-ups' intelligence and talents by the extent to which they took part in my games. The more interest a grown-up showed in a game, the higher he stood in my table of ranks. The highest rank was held by my grandmother whose exceptional energy earned her the rank of generalissimo. My uncle was a general and Uncle Fedya the driver, a colonel. Next came various majors and captains. I generously gave out these ranks like presents, this way and that. Any soldier in my army could earn himself the rank of general with a successful quip and, on the contrary, a general who committed an offence could be degraded to the ranks in a trice. My father, for instance, changed ranks several times a day.

He once spent three hours fiddling with my broken clockwork lorry but to no avail. Then my mother stuck a hair-pin in it and it worked like magic. My father instantly fell from grace but not for long. And my mother was too infallible for me to be delighted with her for long. Father was soon exonerated. It happened like this: I had just received a low mark at school. True, I had been given even lower ones before but this one came the day before my birthday. Father did not usually tell me off for bad marks. That was mother's job. He simply did not give me cinema money. Incidentally, I was not particularly good at school at all. You couldn't say I knew absolutely nothing. No, I knew a few things, of course, but mostly superficially and by hearsay. The only thing that saved me was a kind of fierce determination. There were plenty of gifted pupils in our form but some lacked self-confidence and spoke hesitantly even when answering questions in class and so looked pathetic and gave the impression of not knowing very much. Others, after learning the whole lesson off pat, would sit at their desks on pins and needles but when called to the blackboard, would forget some minute detail or other and start blushing and stuttering with excitement as if doubting their answers were correct. I always answered loudly, cheerfully and boldly, true, not always to the point but, to make up for it, without pausing for breath. This was very important because it made others think I had learned my lesson but was prevented from

concentrating on it by numerous information of secondary importance and this caused my answer to lose its shape. I was so sure of myself that I even had time to marvel at how splendidly I was answering, and setting off back to my desk, would make a mental note of the mark I ought to get.

It's a well-known proverb—once bitten, twice shy. After my parents had been summoned to school, I started doing my homework properly. From then on I answered questions brilliantly and got nine and a half out of ten. No teacher ever gave me ten—always nine and a half. By doing so, they obviously wanted to stress that I knew the material but lacked, as it were, inspiration or simply the will to study. Recalling my school-days, I come to the conclusion that you can achieve a great deal and that the most important thing is to overcome your laziness in time.

The evening after I received the low mark, father sat down to read the newspaper after supper as usual. I don't know what he was actually reading about but all of a sudden he put the paper down and started pacing up and down the room, singing something under his breath. Then he stopped and invited me to a game of chess.

"Put out the pieces," he said,"I'll thrash you at a couple of games."

Father and I often had chess battles. Father played without a rook and we were a fair match with these odds. Father played recklessly, forfeiting pieces, while I tried to only make exchanges so as to keep an extra rook at the end of the game. My simple tactics often reaped rewards and father lost. And then he always praised me and chaffed himself, unlike me who never commented on my opponent's good play and always considered it was simply my own fault for playing badly. Sometimes, however, after several defeats in a row, father lost his cool.

"Oh, who plays like that?!" he would say, smiling sarcastically. "All you can do is swap pieces. You didn't have a single combination! Fancy spoiling a game like that!"

Thus, father not so much stressed my dull-witted play as bolstered his own self-esteem.

Arranging the pieces that evening, he went on singing softly. I could tell he was in a good mood and so, you see,

thought it was just the right moment to tell him about my bad mark as I would have to show him my report the following Saturday anyway.

"Dad," I said, "I got three out of ten today."

"Well done!" he said, making the opening move.

He played the whole game in silence, only puckering his brow and frowning, and I could tell he was either working out his moves or thinking up a punishment for me. In the end he won the game, and the wrinkles on his forehead relaxed as he announced cheerfully, "That's the way to teach lazybones who get low marks!"

I felt relieved and it at once flashed through my mind that if I lost another game, he would be in the best of moods.

"No, that'll do," he said, "Never have too much of a good thing. I've got a bit of work to do." And then he started clearing away the pieces and singing something softly again.

I realised that such an opportunity would not present itself again for a long time and making the most of my father's good mood, reminded him about my forthcoming birthday and hinted at a present. However, he took absolutely no notice and went on clearing away the pieces and singing to himself. So I dropped a bigger hint and then he snorted, "My, you've got a nerve, my lad! Fancy getting low marks and still demanding a present. No, you've given yourself one already."

He hooted with laughter, but not unkindly, and the next day gave me a present after all.

Our family shared the ground floor with the Kirillins and a single woman who owned a dog. Old Kirillina had dark hair and pouting lips. She wore gaudy dresses and looked like a flowerbed. She waved her arms about when she spoke, which she did a great deal because she was a terrible busybody and not even the most trifling event passed her by. She poked her nose into everything and was always in the know and constantly trying to take command of our house, if not of the whole street.

In the evenings she used to sit and knit her husband a jumper in the kitchen so as to be always where the action

was. She hated being by herself. She often caused rows between the womenfolk in the kitchen. It would all begin with some comment about the cooking and then came a hail of abuse and insults, which turned to blows with all the kitchen utensils—mugs and ladles, teapots and pans—used as ammunition. Every time the men heard Kirillina raising her voice, they would flee from the house as if from an approaching earthquake. But I always hovered about the kitchen at such moments because after the skirmishes I picked up lots of broken things, which I then stored away in the veranda in the hope that they would one day come in handy. At that time our veranda resembled a refuse dump of chipped and broken crockery.

For all the menfolk in our house, the kitchen was rather like a gladiators' arena, and only belligerent Kirillina's husband took no notice of the crockery slinging matches. Only on rare occasions when the brawls in the kitchen spilled out into the street and threatened to undermine the peace of other houses, would he appear in the kitchen and lead his incensed spouse away, winking at me and saying, "Never a dull moment when you share a house!"

After leaving the field of battle, old Kirillina would continue to fume and shout abuse from her room for a long time. No sooner had she finished inveighing against her immediate enemies—women—than she started accusing the men of being spineless. And her main target, of course, was her husband who, to her mind, was a downright coward.

"You stupid nitwit! Who do you think you are!" she would shriek. "Calls himself a husband! His wife's been pecked to pieces, but he doesn't so much as open his mouth! Just you wait I'll give you what-for yet! You won't know what's hit you!.."

And as a preview of things to come, she would unravel the half-knitted jumper she was making him, and start knitting herself a cardigan.

Our aggressive Kirillina rowed with all the house's inmates. Only my father was let off the hook for a long time but then in the end his turn came too.

After lunch father enjoyed sitting and smoking some-

where in the breezy shade. At first he used to stretch himself out in a wicker chair, read a newspaper and smoke in the corridor by the front door. It all began one day when Kirillina informed him that his cigarette smoke was wafting under the door of their room and that all their wallpaper reeked of nicotine, and asked him to smoke on the porch with the door closed behind him. For several days father smoked on the porch but then our neighbour complained yet again. It appeared that the smoke was still seeping through the key-hole. She demanded that he smoked in the garden. So father started smoking in the garden but a week later Kirillina announced that when father came back in, his clothes reeked so much of smoke that she suffered from chest pains. So then there was nothing left for father to do but sit about in the garden after smoking.

Kirillina and I were constantly at loggerheads. I only had to knock a couple of apples off her tree and she would shout that I was shaking the whole tree down. I only had to pick three flowers and she would shriek that I was pulling up the whole flowerbed. What's more, she never forgot to add, "How long's he going to be such an ass?! The spitting image of his uncle he is."

Sometimes she would accuse me of the most wicked crimes. For instance, her shed's roof had rusted because I climbed all over it. After being unjustly accused of something along these lines, I decided to get my own back. They had an amazing clock which struck so loudly on the hour that all the glass-panes in the house rattled. Its chimes used to make me jump up in fright several times during the night. One day while the Kirillins were away at work, I crept through an open window into their room and took the weights off the clock. Afterwards Kirillina kicked up such a terrible fuss that the whole street knew about it and then she went and broke my fishing-rods when nobody was looking.

This war continued for a long time until I finally grew up enough to realise that the best kind of revenge was silent scorn.

Kirillina turned the whole street against her. She was especially loathed by Uncle Fedya for calling him an

"inveterate drunkard". Once Uncle Fedya remarked, "It wouldn't be enough to kill her!"

I don't remember the context in which he said it but I do remember I immediately offered my services.

Kirillina's husband was fat and bald and had a bushy grey moustache. He was constantly changing professions but not because he could not find one he really liked but because he was a Jack-of-all-trades. A good carpenter, shoemaker and a dab hand at technical equipment, he was once brought an old broken-down motor-bike, which even a repairs shop had refused to handle, but after spending two evenings on it, he got it back into shape. He was obviously so talented that he quickly got the knack of any trade but then immediately lost all interest in it and longed to take on something new. As he put it himself: "This is all chicken's feed. My fingers are itching to get some real work."

At that time he was working as a taster at a tea-sorting factory. In his youth he had supposedly lived in the Caucasus where he had learnt to differentiate teas. The three tasters who worked at the factory were referred to as the "council of noses" because they sniffed the new blends of tea, looked at their colour and sampled their flavour. They would then mutter "a good bouquet" or "a bitter bouquet" and give each blend a grade. At home he had caddies full of teas from different countries and teas made from black-currant leaves, cowberries, carrot tops and even some kind of bark.

Every morning he used to gurgle and grunt at the wash-basin for a long time and then go into the kitchen, stretch and say in a deep bass, "Somehow I'm in the mood for something exciting today!" and then wink at our neighbour with the dog, open his arms and try and grab her.

"You're going too far!" the woman would mumble, edging away and blushing.

"Well, if I'll be damned!" Kirillina would exclaim and stalk off to her room in disgust.

The dog-owner—an attractive woman with sleek brown hair—worked as an accounting clerk at the bakery. She was very absent-minded and always losing something or other. For instance, no sooner had she bought a pair of gloves than she would lose them. Sometimes she found them,

though, like she did three pairs in the lining of her coat.

She once bought ten plates but came home with only one.

She had a small dog which, no matter how well she looked after it, was still terribly dirty. She kept a pot under the stairs for it which she called a "night commode" but the dog never used it and always went wherever it liked.

The woman was fond of singing and her repertoire changed according to the company she was in. Thus, while talking to my mother, she would launch every now and then into arias, with my father or Kirillina's husband she would sing Paganel's song * about a lovesick captain, with me the pirates' song "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum". And after a row with Kirillina she would sing battle songs. You could always tell who she was with by the songs she sang. She had a gentle and natural singing voice, which I did not like because I considered you had to sing forcefully. When I sang a march, I put everything I had into it and sang as if my heart was breaking, and forced out such high notes that the veins on my neck bulged. The more ecstatic a singer was, the more I admired him. And this applied not only to singing: I considered you had to put passion into everything and that nothing wonderful could be produced without it.

Sometimes our neighbour with the dog seemed determined to look miserable, come what may. She would go about with an enigmatic look and traces of tears in her eyes. And sometimes she would say that she had a sweetheart and many friends and a really "interesting job". Every now and then she would receive flowers and letters supposedly from her sweetheart who, she said, had been trying to win her favours for many years. In the evenings, however, I sometimes heard sobbing sounds coming from her room and then by chance found out that she was sending the presents and letters to herself.

Kirillina called the woman "an old maid" and constantly made fun of her. One day she played a nasty trick on her and

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* A popular song from the Soviet film "Captain Grant's Children".—*Tr.*

left her a letter saying that her sweetheart had gone off and married someone else. The woman did not appear in the kitchen for several days afterwards. Incidentally, this was one of Kirillina's first poison pen letters. Several years later when I had grown up enough to have a sweetheart of my own, Kirillina once replied to her letter on my behalf. I don't know what she put in it but the girl stopped corresponding with me.

When the woman was singing in the kitchen one day, I somehow joined in without even noticing it myself. I forgot to mention one other particular quality to her singing: the tunes she sang were rather catchy and after hearing them once, you could not get them out of your head. And even if you did not actually sing them, they kept plaguing you until you sang them to somebody else. That's just how infectious they were.

Hearing me join in, the woman turned to me and said, "You've got a good ear. You should take up music," and then invited me to her room.

"I can see you're a well-mannered boy and not one of those disreputable boors." Frowning, she nodded towards the Kirillins' room. "I'm going to show you something I've never shown anyone before. Only let's keep it a secret between the two of us. You can keep a secret, can't you?"

I nodded and froze in anticipation, but then the woman led me towards her bureau, opened a door and I caught sight of a paper castle and some tin-foil figures of women in old-fashioned dresses and men in feathered hats and cloaks.

"This countess here is very bossy and proud... But this one's meek and mild... And this duke is courting this lady... And that one's..."

Almost forgetting I was there, she went on telling me all sorts of things. I glanced askance at her and suddenly realised she was out of her mind.

Shortly afterwards she was taken away to hospital and when she was discharged, a nurse used to come and visit her regularly. A telephone was installed in her room so that she could call the doctor. It was the only telephone in our street and everybody used to drop by and use it. After coming in, they would first inquire after her health for politeness's

sake and then immediately ask if they could use her telephone. The kind-hearted sick woman imagined that they were all genuinely concerned about her health and it was only after she had fully recovered and her telephone had been taken away that she realised the real reason for this attention.

Our busybody used the telephone most. In the early morning she would come running in to say "a few words" and then start ringing up all her countless relatives. And she would chat away for several hours at a time. Somewhere in the middle of a conversation she would begin to say good-bye and then suddenly remember something else and go on talking for ages. Her husband sometimes lost his patience and started banging on the door and shouting, "That'll do, you windbag!"

Everybody came to use her telephone, everyone, that is, except Uncle Fedya. To make up for it, when it was removed and everyone stopped coming to see the woman, Uncle Fedya started calling by. Shifting from one foot to the other, he would hand a bouquet of flowers to me and looking aside, say, "Go and tell her I've dropped by to find out how she feels."

Boris, a strapping young bachelor with a permanent grin on his face, lived on the upper floor of our house, directly above the Kirillins. He worked as a waiter and on Sundays helped our yard-keeper shovel coal, simply as a way of keeping fit. He was famous for having turned his two poky little rooms into the most amazing apartment in the whole district. First, he knocked down the partitions between them and made one large room with an attic storey, two fountains and a fireplace. Then he directed the chimney through the air-vent, which was rather short-sighted of him because when he lit a fire for the first time, the smoke almost choked us. Afterwards the other inmates, especially the womenfolk, kicked up a fuss, and every time Boris took it into his head to make a new gadget and started bringing home material for it, they would set up pickets in front of the house. Kirillina was the ringleader because she was quite convinced that our house was going to collapse or burn down at any moment and that it would all be the fault of our

foolhardy upstairs neighbour. But Boris only smiled and went on improving his flat. After completing the fireplace, he set up some kind of American electric stove on his balcony but it turned out to require a three-phase current and he had to connect it to the tea-sorting factory two streets away. True, when the stove was finally connected up, Boris concocted some superb dishes on it, and all the women would come running in to watch him.

Everything in Boris's room was unusual: its amazingly thick door which also served as a cupboard; his iron, which turned itself on automatically when the ironing board was opened out; a bare wall covered with nothing but sockets for electric appliances which all worked on different voltages. But most unusual of all was his radio and record-player. Every evening after work Boris would stand it on the window-sill, put some music on, and sit down nearby in a blissfully happy mood and watch the street down below. He played the same jazz record over and over again for he considered there was definitely an innovatory quality to his music. I mean, it was revitalising and speeding up the tempo of life in our street, waking up the sleepy-heads and urging on those who were not keeping pace with the times.

At that time our house in general resembled a musical box or, more precisely, an out-of-tune organ, what with the dog-owner's singing, Kirillina's blaring radio and Boris's noisy jazz. It is hard to describe how hard it was for mother who was very fond of classical music, not to mention my father who loved peace and quiet. However, one has to give Boris his due for he did sometimes pop into the kitchen and ask if his music was disturbing anyone.

"Yes, it is!" Kirillina would shriek before anyone could open their mouths. "Not half it isn't! And so is the smoke! When you smoke, it comes through the cracks in our ceiling."

And incidents like these took place right before my eyes and not just anywhere but in our house. Yes, I must say, we certainly had a whale of a time in our little house.

My father once caught cold and Kirillin advised him to drink vodka with pepper in it. Father did as he was told but the dog-owner then appeared with some vodka and milk,

and father drank that, too. Then Boris came home with some brandy and the two of them drank the whole bottle. Father was blind drunk by then but, amazingly enough, the next morning felt as fit as a fiddle.

Boris worked as a waiter at our town's one and only restaurant. As soon as anyone came into the restaurant, Boris would bound up with a dazzling smile and, rippling his muscles, say, "Good day to you! The same again for you today?" Then he would bring the same dish that the client had ordered previously. He had a professional memory and remembered the favourite dishes of absolutely everybody in our town and even of visitors from other towns who came back to the restaurant a second time.

He was a wizard at his job and could carry eighteen plates on a tray! What's more, he would weave between the tables like a slalom skier, playing up to his "audience" and carrying plates with the greatest of ease. You can probably learn to carry this many plates but you won't necessarily become an artiste. Likewise, you can learn to stand on a tight-rope but this still can't be called true art. But if you smile while you're doing it—that's quite another matter! A circus acrobat on a horizontal bar is not as skilled as a gymnast but he keeps us spellbound by using each stunt to such good effect.

Besides everything else, Boris had great intuition: you only had to reach for a bottle and he appeared out of nowhere; you only had to think about a roast and it was there in front of you. What's more, he would tell you all the local news, ask your advice on such things as buying his brother a bicycle and thus immediately create a warm and friendly atmosphere. He usually ended up by sitting down at a client's table and drinking and eating with him.

The yard-keeper and his family lived in our house's annex. A strange individual who wrote poetry, visited art exhibitions and argued with artists, he was always improving his work tools. In the mornings he would do exercises and then douse himself with water, following the system of some Dutch doctor or other. He and the yard-keeper from the next block often divided our street in two

and swept the road with their families, racing each other.

Our yard-keeper loved "pick-me-ups". He used to make liqueurs from berries and fruits and anything else he came across. He would drink a glass of wine and then go outside and look for people to talk to. He was very fond of chatting about art and medicine. Towards the New Year he would earn extra money at kindergartens by dressing up as Santa Claus, and in summer went around the houses, mending window frames and roofs. He checked the time with an alarm-clock and charged seventy kopecks per hour.

In those days his daughter, aged about six, was always pestering me either to go to the park or play robbers with her. A fine friend she had picked herself! Incidentally, at that time I did not get on well with girls of my own age but, to make up for it, was popular with younger children, dogs and old women: with children because, although a teenager, I was not at all mature, with dogs because I loved madcap games and adventures, and with old women because I was very talkative and, well, everyone knows how curious old women are and they used to get the latest news out of me. So, as I was saying, the yard-keeper's daughter kept pestering me and one day I decided to waste half a day on her so as to get rid of her once and for all. I played robbers with her all morning and then went to the park with her and gave her rides on the swings. Then we climbed up and down the dam and finally rode on a tram until we got bored. At last she said, "Let's go home. I'm tired." We were on our last legs by the time we reached the porch but at least she left me alone after that.

However, our most interesting neighbour lived above us. I remember a whole month going by after we moved in without me setting eyes on him. He was a joiner and the whining sounds of a plane and tapping of a wooden hammer used to come from his room for days at a time. I used to imagine his room cluttered with shavings, his joiner's bench, set of tools and sweet-smelling new furniture. Falling asleep to the sound of his plane every evening, I could clearly see him leaning over the bench, smiling faintly with a cigarette behind his ear, beads of

sweat on his forehead and glasses perched on the end of his nose.

And when I woke up in the morning, the plane was already droning overhead. I remember how ashamed I always felt for sleeping so late. He made me feel guilty and long to work too. He got his own way in the end for I gave in and asked Uncle Fedya for a saw, a hammer, planks and nails and started making my mother a kitchen shelf. It was not very straight but all the womenfolk still praised me and asked me to make another two. Next I made a stool and a shelf for the books piled up in the corridor. These turned out very well and met with approval. Rumours about my skilled carpentry spread down the street and I was inundated with requests which I never turned down and always did my best to satisfy. My hands were covered with blisters and splinters and I got tired but it was a pleasant sort of tiredness which I had never experienced before. For the very first time I was making useful things and enjoying the work. What surprised me most was that this feeling of happiness was stronger than any other I had experienced when, for instance, I was running away from home or idling at granny's house or bought a bicycle or even was with girls I liked.

After that the joiner working above us meant even more to me, rather like a partner at work. I longed to make his acquaintance but did not dare to for a long time. And then one day I plucked up courage and walked into his room and suddenly realised nobody lived there. It was a storeroom containing various fruit crates and a ventilator airing the musty atmosphere.

And even after satisfying myself that nobody lived above us, I still could not get rid of my fantasy. So clearly could I see the joiner in my mind's eye that for days afterwards I went on believing in this person's existence and, most importantly, had grown so keen on carpentry that I could not imagine my future life without it.

Along the Riverbank

I only vaguely remember this happening—perhaps it really did or perhaps I've made it all up. Sometimes I can see all the details of this incident so clearly that I am ready to swear by all I hold dear that it actually happened. At others, however, I feel I am only telling it to make my childhood sound more exciting.

When I was small, I used to be sent off to my mother's sister, Aunt Gruna, in the country for the summer. My aunt absolutely doted on me and never even called me by name but only "my treasure" or "angel". I eventually began to take this for granted. I mean, I was sure I really was a messenger from heaven and was later very surprised when my aunt called me "treasure" less and less often and then not at all.

In summer I was pampered like a hothouse plant. My aunt protected me from colds, sunstroke, mosquitoes, flies, and other insects and anyone who dared to come near me. She completely limited my circle of acquaintances. We lived in a small whitewashed house surrounded by a mown lawn and even beds of spiky spring onions and tufty radishes. And this tidy little world was cut off by a tall fence, which, fortunately, had several holes.

I could always feel my aunt breathing down my neck. She constantly stood between me and the outside world like an invisible protective barrier or an impenetrable sheet of glass. She never let me out of her sight and it is no wonder that I began hating her after a while. All I thought about was how to give her the slip and do things I was forbidden to. She only had to be off her guard for a moment and I was off like a shot towards the fence, crawling through a hole and racing headlong towards the river. But my bodyguard never failed to overtake me.

Such was my life that soon anything my aunt said drove me out of my wits. That's not to mention her flower beds I could not stand the sight of them. Their excessive smoothness used to infuriate me. If I had had my own way then, I would have trampled them. To make up for it, everything

beyond the fence seemed wonderful. At that time I was very fond of robbers because they seemed to lead a most independent sort of life. Generally speaking, I did sometimes have fun with my aunt when she took part in my games such as hunting sparrows with a bow. I, of course, only gave her a minor part in the hunt, such as carrying my bow, so as not to diminish my own importance. True, I did let her shoot an arrow several times and laughed at how awkward she was and then described her blunders to my parents. Belittling my aunt was a way of praising myself.

Many years have passed since then but life at my aunt's has left its mark on me. I still suffer slightly from claustrophobia. I feel stifled in small rooms and hate underground passes and tunnels and feel my freedom is being infringed upon even in mountains.

I did, however, once manage to escape from my aunt and, what's more, vanished for a long time.

That day has stuck in my memory for two reasons: firstly, because I slipped away from her watchful eye at a moment when I had least expected to. She dropped her glasses and while she was hunting for them, I simply vanished. It was then I realised that pleasant things are even more pleasant when they happen unexpectedly. And, secondly, because that day I found the key to the door of the world of nature.

Once on the other side of the fence, I raced towards the river—not in a straight line as usual but through a valley overgrown with rose willows. With this cunning manoeuvre I at once knocked my aunt off course. She could not believe I was capable of thinking up such a thing for, like my parents, she obviously underrated me. I clearly remember understanding far more in my childhood than my relatives gave me credit for.

After running through the valley towards the river, and realising my aunt had already run out to search for me, I decided to lie low for a while. Spotting an enormous snag, I lay down under it and covered myself with branches. A few minutes later my aunt dashed by breathlessly, breaking bushes down like a tank, and dripping in perspiration.

"Lord!" she wailed. "My angel's disappeared!"

Meanwhile her "angel" was lying under the snag, sniggering. At last I'd got my own back on my aunt for everything! This was the most pleasant moment of my life so far. It even flashed through my mind to upset my aunt even more by drowning myself but, after weighing up all the pros and cons, I came to the conclusion that my own life was still worth more than my aunt's and gave up the idea.

I stayed put until my exhausted aunt started tottering home to gulp down pills for her heart condition and call the neighbours out to search. Then I crawled out of hiding and walked along the river.

I was in a wonderful mood. I knew all I would get was an edifying lecture and I did not think at all about my aunt worrying. Other people's misfortunes did not bother me much then. Whenever I was told about them, I would pretend to look upset but shortly afterwards forget all about them. My own future was what mattered to me most and I did not particularly have to worry about that. My aunt had tried to chart it out for many years to come by safeguarding me from mishaps in advance. That is most likely why I now have an aversion for anything too well-organised.

I walked along the bank, kicking shells, tossing pebbles into the water and catching beetles and caterpillars. At that time, incidentally, I was convinced that all insects existed simply to be caught by me. I had soon gone quite a long way. The river had forked into numerous narrow creeks with small islets, and tall plants shaped like umbrellas and gramophones growing on their white quicksand. Elegant wagtails, darting along ever so fast and then stopping sharply and wagging their tails like toy-clock pendulums, chased after flies along the thick damp sand by the water's edge. The creeks were shallow and so clear you could see every pebble on the bottom. Every now and then gudgeons streaked through the water like silver lightning and dragonflies hovered over the surface.

I splashed through the warm shallow water like an explorer, investigating every islet and stream and giving them all names—mostly linked to my own. However,

I was not so stupid as to let my descendants remember me as an egoist, and named several small islets after my relatives and friends. What's more, the size of the named area depended not on family ties but on the number of presents one or another person had given me. I remembered all my family except, of course, my aunt, for I considered that tyrants did not deserve to be remembered at all.

An hour later and a fair way on, I suddenly caught sight of a suntanned man by one of the creeks. He was squatting on his heels and, would you believe it, building tiny bridges across the streams. I crept closer, drew the branches of a bush apart and started watching him. Tall and gaunt, with thick auburn hair, he was whittling at, and sorting out various chocks and twigs like a magician, with an air of concentration, and the corners of his lips quivering in a smile. He was smoking and flakes kept flying from his cigarette.

However, it was his bridges that were most strange. Light and flimsy and held together by scarcely visible twines, some reminded me of music that had suddenly faded away. You only had to blow on them, it seemed, and they would fall apart. However, to test the strength of his creations, every now and then the man would stand on the bridges and, amazingly enough, these fragile structures stood his weight!

Other incredibly long bridges stretched from one bank to the other without any supports whatsoever and quite surprisingly did not collapse. Others resembled arches and viaducts with numerous props of various kinds decorated with pebbles and shells. Others still were made of different-coloured branches like little rainbows.

"Who is this fellow?" I wondered. "A magician or a loony? And why's he building toy bridges instead of real ones?"

I longed to shout out at the top of my voice so that everyone came running over to look at this wonderful sight. And so I rushed home at full speed. I could not wait to tell my aunt all about it but pedantic as ever, she started ticking me off, appealing to my reason, and

complaining about my ingratitude. Then she spent a long time sobbing and calming down again. And when she finally began to show some sparks of interest in what I had seen, it suddenly started pouring with rain.

When it stopped, my aunt, groaning, put on her high overshoes and trudged down to the river with me. All the way she kept moaning about the leaking roof and eroded beds and it was only when we reached the river that she fell silent. Why, she's just as astonished as me, I thought. You see, there were no bridges. Instead, murky, foaming torrents of water gushed past us.

Morning Trams

From a very young age I longed to run away from home. Day and night I dreamed of living for a while without my parents and their reprimands and restraints and constant control over my freedom. As soon as I learnt to walk, I started hiding in cupboards, under beds and in trunks. At about three I was already climbing into such inaccessible nooks and crannies that not only all the house's inmates were called out to search but sometimes even the police. At five, when my imagination and love of freedom had increased somewhat, I started investigating neighbouring yards and streets.

The things they used to do with me! I was locked up in the flat and put in kindergartens but nothing helped. Sooner or later I would find a hole and escape. I came home only when I felt hungry and, what's more, late in the evening when father and mother were already worn out from running round the yards looking for me.

When I was slightly older, I made a wonderful discovery: tram rides. Waking up early one morning, I heard my parents getting ready to go to market. As soon as they had gone, I jumped out of bed and ran out of the house.

It was still very early. The wind was blowing quietly along the deserted streets; somewhere in a house a clock was striking loudly and alarm-clocks were buzzing. I walked down all the familiar side-streets and came out into a street with rails running along it. And there stood a sparklingly clean tram, the first one of the morning.

Rummaging through my pockets, I found a few coins and jumped on. At that time I was given a little pocket-money for ice-cream and the cinema—true, after a lot of blackmailing and threats about possibly disappearing for good. I somehow felt much freer when I had money on me.

After boarding the tram that morning, I took a ticket from the collector and sat down in the best front seat by an open window.

"Going far so early?" she asked.

I muttered something vague and turned towards the window and she burst out laughing.

Shortly afterwards, the driver got on, winked at me and off we went. The side-streets, signboards and gutters flashed by as the tram rolled further and further across the town. I was not afraid of getting lost, though, for I knew all I had to do was get onto a tram going in the opposite direction and it would speed me back home.

Meanwhile the town was coming to life outside. The streets were filling with pedestrians and vehicles; the smell of hot fresh bread came wafting out of bread-shops; dairy-women's churns glinted and water splashed as yard-keepers hosed down the thoroughfares. You could tell it was going to be a hot noisy day. After riding about five stops I decided I had gained quite enough impressions for the first time, and got off and jumped onto a tram going in the opposite direction. And in no time at all I was back at home again.

I gradually took longer and longer rides and then started getting off and exploring the vicinity more thoroughly.

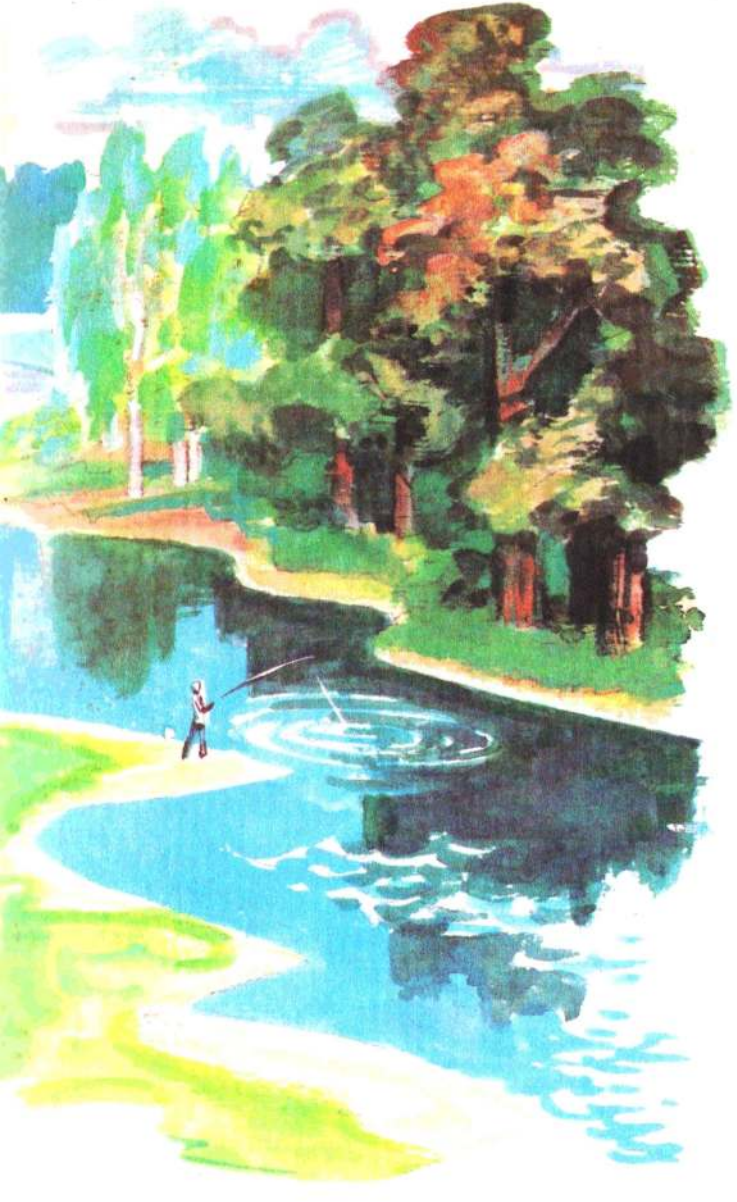
By the time I started school there wasn't a single street in town I hadn't explored. And this was a good thing, too, of course, for I can imagine how restless I would have been at my desk if there had been something mysterious

left outside. However, this still did not stop me from playing truant later on.

One day in the third form, after taking umbrage at a teacher who, in my opinion, had given me a lower mark than I deserved, I walked out of lessons and got onto the first tram I came across. I did not care which way it was going for, you see, I was in no hurry. After riding about three stops, I noticed that the gaps between houses were becoming larger, the houses themselves smaller and the stops more seldom. Then the houses completely disappeared and the tram started rumbling between vegetable plots with rattles, scarecrows and watchmen's huts. It stopped in a remote outlying district from where the town was only just visible in the distance. On the outskirts of the town there was a stream among the blue-capped rose willows, and a narrow-gauge railway with a small toy-like monkey-engine puffing and whistling shrilly as it shunted back and forth similar toy-like wagons loaded with clay.

I had been at this stop once before or, rather, I had watched it out of a tram window but then the tram had quickly turned round and rumbled back. This time, however, I did not want to miss the chance of thoroughly investigating the surrounding area. What's more, I was not in a very good mood and decided to stay away from home as long as possible. It was most likely then that I came to the conclusion that the best way of getting into a good mood was by ruining someone else's. I don't know whether I was thinking that or not but, anyway, after walking along the springy planks across the stream and finding myself on an uninhabited islet, I decided to stay away from home for good.

I lay flat on the ground, chewed a rather bitter blade of grass and watched little chains of ants moving between the blades and pillars of dust, and then turned over onto my back and watched the wind rustling the tree-tops and the birds flashing between the sunlit branches. The weather was wonderful and I felt relaxed. I started climbing trees and tossing pebbles into the air and forgetting all my troubles at school, cheered up completely and decided to make a tour of my kingdom. After taking a few steps,



I realised someone else had already been on the islet. In one spot I saw some covered rows of potato plants and in another, some yellow and pink-stained sweet-smelling blocks of a freshly-hewn pine.

All of a sudden I felt ravenous and recalling my lunch, rushed over to my satchel and devoured a sandwich but it only whetted my appetite. So I dug up some bluish new potatoes, gathered together some dry branches and lit a bonfire. I always carried matches with me—not because I used to smoke on the sly. Nothing of the sort! We simply used to strip the sulphur off them, stuff it into keys and then attach nails to the keys and hurl them at walls.

After tossing the potatoes onto the fire, I decided to do some fishing and set about making a rod. I unravelled part of my sock and attached a safety pin I kept in my satchel to the thread. I used a pencil stub as a float and an ordinary switch of rose willow as a rod. Then I dug up a worm, attached it to the safety pin and set off towards the stream. After finding a pleasant little creek, I sat down on a plank riddled with woodworm, and cast my rod into the grass blowing about in the current. The bait was quickly carried sideways and I was just about to cast my rod again when the float suddenly jerked and began bobbing on the water. I pulled sharply and a fish half-flew out of the water but then broke free of the safety pin and flopped back in. The same thing happened about a dozen times. I had already given up hope of catching anything and was about to angrily throw the rod away when at that very moment the float stopped still, and then spun round and suddenly plunged downwards. I grabbed the rod with both hands and pulled and, would you believe it, a perch flopped onto the grass. Not a particularly big one—I had caught bigger ones before but this one had a rusty hook in its lips... I imagined how it must have rushed about the underwater reeds for a long time, pulling the fisherman's rod this way and that and then finally broken the line...

After gathering together lots of caterpillars and beetles, I caught two more small fishes. Then I spent ages scaling the perch, roasting it on sticks and turning the potatoes

over in the ashes. I felt happy because I was free to do whatever I liked and nobody was there to restrict my freedom. I had at last slipped out of custody and was now the happiest boy in the world.

By the time I had finished my meal, the sun had almost set and long shadows appeared on the island. These creeping, shuddering shadows made me feel rather gloomy and then as bad luck would have it, I suddenly recalled the pancakes mother made in the mornings. After the tasteless potatoes I longed to drink sweet tea with some pancakes. However, trying to think of something else, I set about building a shelter with a framework of twigs covered with fir branches and grass.

And an hour later I was lying snugly in my own luxurious home, and inhaling the fragrance of sun-warmed leaves...

I was awoken by the cold. I could see the starry sky through my shelter's roof. My bonfire had gone out and some reddish coals were barely glowing under the ashes. I was too lazy to crawl out of my shelter and light it again and rather scared of gathering dry wood in the dark and so I squatted on my heels to warm up, hugging my knees and breathing on my chest. But this did not help: my knees started quaking, shivers ran down my spine and then I began shaking all over. And then suddenly I felt terribly miserable and lonely. Not a single person in the whole wide world needed me! I imagined the only lit window at the other end of town and my mother and father seated at the table inside; mother sighing as she cleared away my supper: a clear broth with carrot rings and chopped dill, millet gruel with a melting knob of butter and a bright-coloured, sweet-smelling fruit juice. I imagined mother flicking away her tears and sitting down to darn my trousers... I remembered father coming back from work and boxing with me on the sofa. I recalled his smile when he gave me stamps and his serious face when he mended my scooter. For some reason or other I was seeing my parents in this light for the very first time and longed to go home...

I was lucky because at that moment I heard a tram clanking and looking out of my shelter, spotted a chain

of lights. I grabbed my satchel and tore off at full speed towards the stop.

Home, sweet home! Only how strange it is that I realised this after spending an amazing day at large!

My Dear Old Granny

Although my granny was very old, she never seemed so. She had a cheerful nature and a rare wit—qualities, which, as a child, I valued more than any other. She lived at the end of our street, in a decrepit wooden house with a rickety porch. The corridor of her house was cluttered with all kinds of junk—broken chairs, candlesticks with candle-ends, tattered books, ink-pots and old quills. And her room was full of plants—huge ficuses and towering green palms, round cacti which looked like sleeping hedgehogs, and numerous agaves and geraniums. The ficuses and palms standing in tubs on the floor were ceiling-high, and the smaller plants stood in pots on the window-sills. It was a large airy room with a high ceiling and old dark-red mahogany furniture embellished with carvings and narrow borders. I was particularly fond of the huge wardrobe with carvings of lions' heads on its doors and often used to climb inside when my friends and I played hide-and-seek. I once crawled in and fell asleep among the clothes reeking of mothballs, and the others spent the rest of the day searching the house from top to bottom until I eventually woke up and climbed out of hiding.

Granny also had a massive ceiling-high sideboard with opening drawers which smelt sweetly of the jars of jam inside.

This furniture split the room into several sections comprising a "bedroom", a "dining-room" and "grand-dad's study". The "bedroom" consisted of a high bed, resembling a huge puff-pastry, with a vast number of blankets, bedspreads and lacy cushion-covers. The "dining-room"

included a table and three chairs with round backs and a lampshade swaying overhead like a blue jelly-fish. The corner by the window marked the border of grand-dad's domain comprising a table with a zinc-coated top, a table-lamp, books and a box containing a set of joiner's tools.

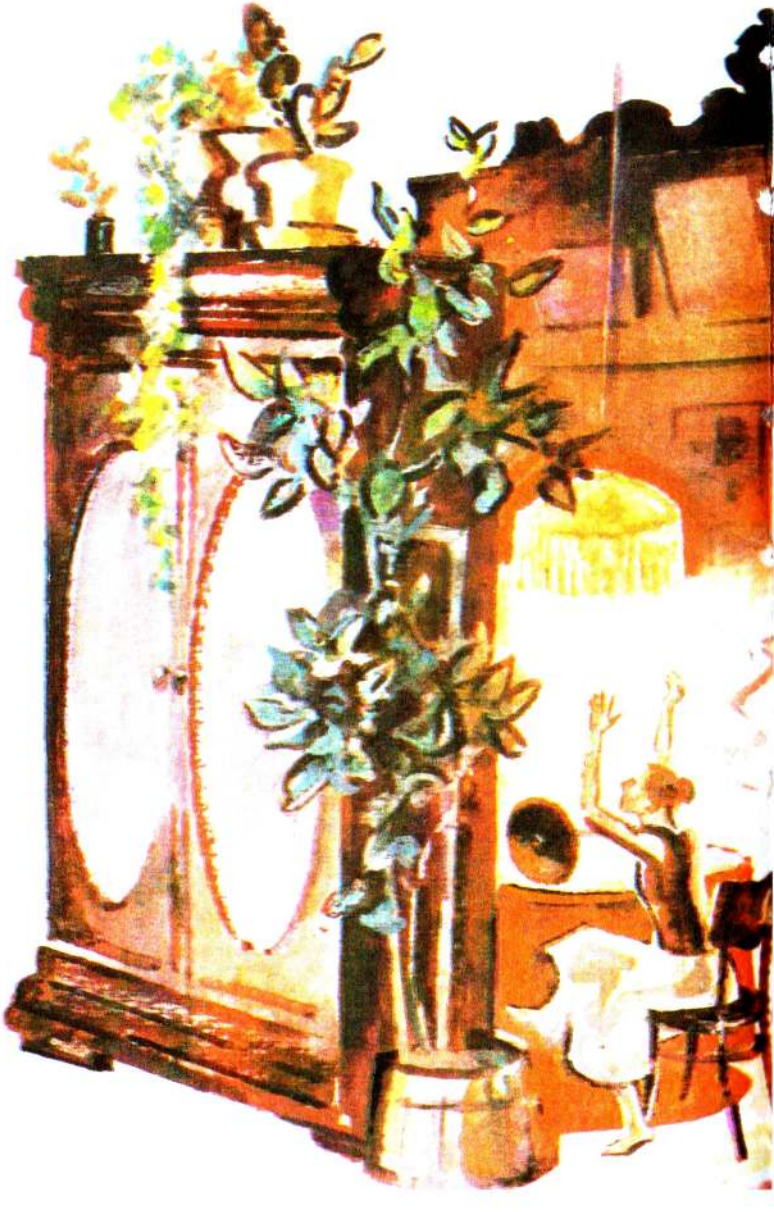
Grand-dad's corner was strictly out of bounds to me and I was only allowed to look at it from a distance of not less than four yards. To make up for it, I could touch all granny's things as much as I liked: the plates in the side-board, the clothes in the wardrobe, the perfumed powder boxes and many other things as well.

The only one of all granny's possessions I was not allowed near was her trunk, but this was what attracted me most. Standing near the door under the coat-rack, covered with a dark-green patterned rug, the heavy copper-plated trunk looked enticingly mysterious. For some reason or other I imagined it was stuffed full of treasure and the rug on top was a flying carpet which was simply waiting to carry me and the trunk off to an uninhabited island. I could already see myself burying the treasure and then calling by every now and then to fill up my pockets.

Time and time again I asked granny what she kept in there but she always smiled rather enigmatically, looked away and replied, "Oh, nothing much!"

But I could tell she was being cunning and went on pestering her with questions. She finally gave in and, taking off her spectacles, went over to open up the trunk. Imagine my surprise when I saw it contained old dresses, blouses and skirts and grand-dad's portrait in which he looked very young. The only two things which seemed to me to be worth anything were an iron brooch with a picture of a bumblebee and grand-dad's medal.

"This bumblebee was made by your grand-dad," granny said. "A long time ago when I was still a young girl, only just a bit older than you, in those days I was very fond of all kinds of beetles and dragonflies. I'd catch a dragonfly, dry it and stick it to my dress like a brooch. And your grand-dad lived in our street. He was only a young lad but already worked as an apprentice. One day



he noticed my dried dragonfly and went and made me this bumblebee as a present... As for that medal! He won that for bravery in the war..." Granny straightened her shawl, closed the trunk and hurried off to the kitchen. Many years later when granny was no longer alive, I once opened the trunk again and, amazingly enough, the bumblebee and the medal suddenly seemed of immense value for they were the best mementos of my wonderful granny.

Whenever I came to see granny, she would sit me down at the table and hand me several napkins for my front, lap and for under my plate and glasses. Then she used to give me millet-porridge and pumpkin, tomato omelettes and mushroom pies and as many sweet things as I could manage. I would eat my fill and then run out into her yard where there were some tall trees good for climbing. And she never let me go home until she had stuffed a bag full of curd tarts and pies.

I would lounge about at granny's for days on end. Whenever she went to the kerosene shop, I would go with her to smell the kerosene. Whenever she did some ironing, I would wave the furnace iron and fan the coals in it. While she was working, granny would sometimes ask me to read out fairy-tales, which mostly had a moral to them. And whenever I made a slip, she would correct me from memory.

I often used to say to her, "Come on, granny, put on your gloves. Let's have a boxing match. I'll show you some passes", or: "Go on, you be goalie and I'll shoot goals at you", or: "Bend down, granny, and I'll sit on top of you. You can be a horse."

And my granny never refused to play these games, unlike my parents, who, incidentally, did not understand me at all. For instance, I used to enjoy it when we had guests. I reckoned that if I came out with a couple of jokes and showed the guests how talented I was, my parents would realise they had obviously underrated me and immediately change their tune with me. However, as soon as the guests appeared, I would be hurriedly handed some sweets and locked out on the veranda. Then I came to the conclusion that my parents did everything to spite me

and started putting this to good use. If I wanted something very badly, I would say, on the contrary, that I did not want it and would be bought it as a punishment. Thus, I even managed to go to summer camp. And as for visiting granny—I only had to mention how much work granny gave me and I was immediately packed off to her.

But granny understood me. She was always putting in a good word for me, and nodded with a serious air whenever I explained why I had got up to mischief. Without my parents' knowing, she used to give me money to buy sweets and even came round to do household chores for me. And afterwards the two of us would chase after a football or go down to the river to fish... Yes, there was no doubt about it, granny was my closest friend. She was very young, she was, my seventy-year-old granny. It was quite impossible to call her granny for, you see, age is measured in mettle and not years.

True, granny was very artful sometimes. For instance, we would play draughts for a couple of hours and then I would suggest we played football as well but as soon as I mentioned it, granny would pretend to be slightly deaf and not to have heard me although she had heard everything before perfectly well. But as soon as I started repeating myself, she would suddenly jump up, slutch her head and start muttering, "Lord! I quite forgot. You and I have still got some washing and shopping to do. It went clean out of my head. What an old scatter-brain I am!"

Recalling her play-acting, I now consider that poor hearing is not such a bad defect after all. You can always pretend not to hear something you don't want to or ask for it to be repeated and then think up a reply in the meantime. And, generally speaking, if you ask me, bad eyesight is an asset and not a defect. A short-sighted person can always not notice what he doesn't wish to.

Like any other, my granny had various oddities. For instance, she believed in God but when her prayers were not answered, she would start cursing Him. She once bought a lottery ticket and started praying to God to send her a prize. "Worker of miracles! Send me a hundred

or so roubles!" she muttered. "I've got to send something to my daughter Gruna in the country. Almighty God, send me money! What will it cost you?!"

God most likely heard granny's plea, for her ticket was a winner. In the following lottery she bought several tickets for she very much wanted to buy some presents for her relatives. She again began to pray to God for help but for some reason or other He decided not to be generous this time. Then granny lost her temper and started accusing God of being heartless. However, after a while she forgot her resentment but never again asked God for anything specific except to rest the souls of the dead, with grand-dad chiefly in mind. She prayed for him to have enjoyable company up there in heaven and for him to see his relatives more often. And she also prayed fervently to God to watch after grand-dad's moral conduct. She did so, if you ask me, because in his life-time he had greatly enjoyed boasting of his amorous exploits as a young man. She probably feared that grand-dad would not give up his monkey-tricks in the next world and God would transfer him to hell, so he and granny would not be able to see each other.

Every time I heard this prayer, in my mind's eye the next world looked rather like our town, full of blooming gardens and gay music—a place where there was no need to think about either food or work. In short, I imagined the next world as being no worse than this one and in some ways even better.

Granny simply adored cats and always fed the feline community in the yard. And they loved granny, too. When other old ladies came out into the yard, they would completely ignore them but as soon as granny appeared, they would rush towards her from every nook and cranny.

She loved dogs, too, but ordinary mongrels and not fancy pedigree ones for she considered mongrels much more intelligent and faithful. At one time she even clipped and combed stray dogs, and called them "doggies" while referring to pet lap-dogs as "hounds".

Granny had an old stray called Astra, a terrible lazy-bones, which snored on the porch for days on end. Its

coat reeked of something rather strange which filled the whole yard.

"That's French perfume," granny would say. "I spilt a whole bottle on her three years ago and she still stinks of it."

Astra loved ice-cream and soda water and enjoyed listening to the radio, too. She was a kind dog. It was as if during her years of life at granny's she had absorbed her kindness or perhaps she was made that way. When I fell ill once, Astra brought me a bone...

Granny was never idle. Even when she was resting after washing or working in the kitchen, she would knit or darn socks on an electric light bulb and sing softly to herself. Her songs were always slow and sad and mostly about love. At that time anything to do with this word seemed to me not worthy of attention. That's why I did not like her songs. I loved marches most because they gave me strength and kept my spirits up. At the end of a song, granny would say, "That's a good song, isn't it?"

"Mmm," I would murmur so as not to offend her.

"In the old days all our songs were good," she would say and smile at some secret thought.

She was always in a good mood. In all my childhood I only remember granny grumbling once. We were riding on a tram one day and pedestrians kept dodging in front of the tram. The driver kept ringing his bell at them but they did not give a straw. Then granny lost her patience and shouted right across the carriage, "Oh, these wretched idlers! Never make way for anyone or stop for vehicles. And some even dawdle on purpose or stop to do up their laces. If they were to sit at the wheel just once, they would stop taunting drivers."

All the other passengers agreed with granny and started nodding and saying "yes". However, we had only just got off the tram when a lorry went rushing madly by and granny fumed, "Oh, these wretched drivers! All they do is swear and splash mud! And if you're lucky, you might just get run down!"

So there's my granny for you. You certainly never had a dull moment with her. With my parents I had good

and bad days but with granny every day was filled with joy from start to finish.

Granny found a common language with everyone. She adapted herself to whoever she was speaking to, whether they be little boys, young girls, adults, old people or highbrows and, most importantly, she always treated them as equals. She would never speak down to children, hold artists in awe or butter up to highbrows.

The professor who lived in our street loved talking to her, and was always asking her advice on everyday matters. For instance, he would ask, "Can you please tell me a good way of waking up on time? I'm forever arriving late at work. I've got three alarm clocks but they make a terrific din when they go off!"

My granny would listen quietly to the professor and then come out with something like, "The best alarm clock for you, my dear professor, is a sense of compassion. Think about your patients a little more and you'll never oversleep."

Some people did not like my granny because of her candour and wit but, if you ask me, half her enemies simply envied her energy and the other half were idlers and good-for-nothings. From this alone you can guess what my granny was like, for they say you can judge a person by his enemies as well as by his friends. Thanks to granny, I became aware of this at a very young age and always take a liking to people whom my envious and spiteful acquaintances cast aspersions upon.

Sometimes I stayed overnight at granny's and in the evenings she would tell me what the old days were like.

"In the old days everything was quite different, you know," she would sigh. "Take the menfolk, for instance. Who are they nowadays? Absolute boors. If they see an old woman, they never make way for her. And if they bump into her, they never say sorry. In the old days men used to be so attentive and considerate. And how brave they were, too!" Granny clasped her hands and sighed again.

Then it was my turn to speak and I would start telling her mostly about how brave I would be when I grew up.

And granny would always listen attentively and stroke me with her cool palm. You see, she saw me as I wanted to be. When my eyes began to close towards the end of our chats, granny would knock some pillows together, make up my bed, kiss me on the forehead and pray that God looked after me. I would jump into bed and granny would take the comb and numerous pins out of her hair, unbraid the grey plait, which she twined round her head, and settle down to write Auntie Gruna a letter, which was so long, it seemed more like a paper dragon to me.

I feel very ashamed now for not once during all that wonderful time did I ever tell granny how much I loved her. Perhaps it was because I looked upon her as a friend but, most likely, I was simply too embarrassed to show my affection for her. I feel twice as ashamed now because over the years I exploited her weaknesses more and more. From morning till nightfall I would chase a ball round the yard or hang about the street, looking for adventures. I would stuff my pockets full of granny's pies and that was the last she saw of me. I never lifted a finger to help and I was very cheeky sometimes. Knowing granny's old-fashioned views, I would send her off to films I had not seen yet like a scout and if she came back in tears, I knew the film was a load of sentimental rubbish but if she came back fuming, I knew it was just the right stuff for me.

The most amazing thing was that my extraordinary granny seemed just like an ordinary old lady to everyone else and to some, just an old crone. The popular old ladies were the ones who sat on front-door steps for days at a time, watching the goings-on in the street like in a theatre. And all these windbags did was tittle-tattle about who they saw together and what they were wearing, and chatter about their illnesses and imminent deaths although they all went on to live to a hundred. And these pathetic old biddies were regarded as the town's most experienced and revered citizens but if you ask me, this praise was not due, for it was really my granny who deserved most respect. Incidentally, this is often the case and not only with old women.

The Secret

At one time I used to reason: "Oh, these grown-ups! They say one thing and do another. It's quite impossible to understand them. They din it into you that it's naughty to tell fibs but do so themselves every minute of the day." For instance, father told everyone that he was giving up smoking but a couple of days later started having a smoke on the sly and then went completely to pieces and began smoking even more than before. Every evening after supper he would go out to the shed, sit down among the gardening tools and light up. One day I popped into the shed and catching sight of me, father did not even hide his cigarette but, on the contrary, took a deep drag on purpose, winked and said, "Don't tell mum I'm smoking."

Mother was even worse: she often whispered to me in a conspiratorial tone, "Don't tell dad I've sold my dress!", and then kissed me on the cheek and put her finger to her lips.

The strangest thing of all was that I only had to point out the difference between their words and deeds to them and they at once flew off the handle.

"That's none of your business!" father would shout.

"What a rude boy you've become!" mother would exclaim indignantly.

At that time I generally considered adults to be a waste of time. For instance, I was sure they totally lacked imagination. I once set fire to a rubber tyre in the yard and imagined myself on a pirate's ship. I was only just getting carried away when father ran up, stamped out the flames, and yelled, "Stop mucking about!" He was sure I had started the fire simply to create a lot of smoke and soot.

Every evening mother would say that the street was having a bad effect on me. If granny was there, she would at once come to my rescue and explain who really was to blame for my bad inclinations. At moments like these I would clench my fists and mutter to myself, "Well done, Granny! Lay into them!"

"Granny's all right," I thought. "She understands me—not completely, of course, but even so..."

Father and mother always underrated me. They told me stories about storks and cabbage-patches until I was nearly ten. I pretended to believe them but really laughed up my sleeve. The only grown-up I admired was my uncle. "Yes, uncle's really got what it takes!" I used to think to myself, but mother called him a "lost soul", and father, a "good-for-nothing" and "thickhead". For his part, uncle called father a "windbag" and mother a "softie".

Uncle was an artist and lived in the attic of the house opposite. He would paint during the day and then go across the roof to visit his artist friends in the other half of the attic. They would smoke, drink cheap wine and talk about the *Cheliuskin*'s and Papanin's recent polar expeditions, Chkalov's pioneering flights and other popular topics at the time. He had once studied at a constructional engineering institute but had left in his second year, declaring that every house was a work of art but its builder's name was never given to it and he was therefore not going to build houses.

On Fridays he held picture exhibitions in the street. He would set up his works and persuade people to buy them, claiming that he had "unrecognised talent".

On Saturdays he would get out his bicycle, pedal down to the river and draw "nudes" on the shore and then walk along the bank, shouting, "Who wants swimming lessons?" and add quietly, "For a pint of beer."

On Sundays he used to come round to us but as soon as he walked in, father would take his newspaper and go out onto the porch, while mother, uncle and I sat down to drink tea. Clearing away the tea things, mother would start saying that if uncle did not drink, he would have become a builder long ago, to which uncle always replied with a smirk, "A builder! But when I drink, I feel like an architect! So there you are, my silly little sister! But what's the point of explaining that to you—you'll never understand."

"You should marry. It would soften you up," mother used to say with a sigh and then uncle would go into the street and sing songs.

"That's the way to live! Why, all I do is waste time!" I used to say to myself. "Oh well, never mind, I'll soon learn to live independently. After all, I've already got a fiancée—Tanya, a most beautiful and kind girl who lives just round the corner. We'll get married soon and then I'll at last move away from my parents and live with her in an attic like my uncle."

I had already worked everything out in my head and the only trifling thing I still had to do was find a suitable attic and tell Tanya about it because, you see, she did not know anything yet—not even that she was my fiancée.

"But that doesn't matter," I thought. "I'll tell her everything just as soon as I find an attic."

My fiancée turned out to be even more wilful than me. One day she plucked up her courage and came over. It all happened like this. At that time I was always covered in bruises—not so much because I liked fights although, of course, you couldn't get by without them, but mainly because I was always climbing up fences, ladders, posts and attics, and anything else that happened to catch my eye. Sometimes I overestimated my strength, lost my grip and came crashing down but was usually lucky and, for instance, slipped off the window-sill onto a pile of wood shavings, off the attic into a haystack and off the shed into a barrel of water. At other times, though, I fell flat on my face.

Every time he spotted a new bruise, my father used to say, "Mark my words: you'll break your neck one day."

None of the grown-ups understood me and all they ever said was: "That madcap's going to come to a bad end."

To make up for it, the lads thought I was a hero and would look upon every new bruise as a war medal.

I was particularly admired by Tanya, who used to stand nearby, gazing anxiously and tenderly at me. One day I tumbled off a tree and as I was limping home, she came up to me and whispered, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes," I replied with bated breath.

"Promise you'll never tell anyone."

"What?" I asked.

"What I'm going to tell you."

"I promise," I said and froze in anticipation.

Then Tanya looked down and whispered something so pleasant that I blushed.

A few days later Tanya and her parents moved away from town and that was the last I saw of her. While she was still being talked about in the yard, I at first really longed to tell this secret to the others but managed to bite my tongue and keep quiet.

By the time I had grown up, I had given away all my secrets, except this tiniest one, which I have kept to myself to this very day, possibly because since then, no matter how hard I have tried, I have never again made such a deep impression on anyone.

Happy-Go-Lucky

One autumn day uncle set fire to the leaves in his front garden and then my friend, Bob Vermisheliev, and I ran over to our vegetable plot and lit a small bonfire there, too. However, our pile of leaves flared up and quickly burned out. So we threw sunflower stalks, dry twigs and then different sorts of grass onto the blaze but they soon burned out, too, while uncle's bonfire went on blazing even more fiercely than ever.

"What's making it burn like that?" Bob asked. "Let's go and look!"

So we ran over to my uncle and saw he was tearing down the fence and tossing the railings onto the bonfire.

"Uncle, what on earth are you doing?" I gasped in horror.

"What?"

"Why are you breaking down the fence?"

"What of it? Well, tell me what's the fence there for?"

"What do you mean? Why, to fence yourself off!"

"Fence yourself off!" uncle mimicked me. "Who from?"

"Everyone else!"

"Everyone else! Rubbish! I'm going to live without a fence. There's nobody I need to fence myself off from. Nobody's going to steal my apples."

He broke down a few more railings and threw them onto the blaze.

"It's just a ridiculous habit. Well, so what if someone steals your apples! What does it matter! You can't fence yourself off from the whole world just because of one bad person. Let's tear down yours as well."

"I don't know," I muttered. "Only if father lets us. What do I care?! I'm not against it!"

Although he was not particularly fond of my uncle, father was not against tearing the fence down. And then other neighbours started pulling theirs down, too, and making paths in their place.

Only the former property owner left his fence intact because, as he put it, "things were calmer that way".

Sometimes for no reason at all uncle would start giving his paintings away. He gave paintings of dogs to granny, flowers to my auntie, water-colour fishing scenes to father, industrial landscapes to Uncle Fedya the driver and self-portraits to me. All in all, I had about twenty. I imagined that he must have an aim in mind: to constantly remind me whose example I should follow and what way I should choose in life.

Some people turned down uncle's paintings because they were "complete rubbish". People like this put uncle beside himself: "Oafs! Here am I giving my works of art away to them but the fools won't take them!"

Then uncle would gather up his paintings and stalk off to his attic. If I happened to be close by at such moments, he would vent his anger on me for I was always his scapegoat.

"You're a fine fellow, too!" he would shout at me. "Here you are standing nearby, not understanding a thing instead of explaining to these oafs what sort of person your uncle is. Do you know who the best artist in our country is?"

"Who?"

"Me! You ought to be proud of having an uncle like me."

Uncle really was an extraordinary person. He could see a bear in a bumble-bee, a snake in evening shadows, fountains in weeping willows, the whole country in our street and an artist in each individual. He considered Uncle Kolya the shoemaker was an artist in footwear and the old plumber, a past master in the art of pipes.

Many people called uncle an eccentric on account of his extraordinary kindness and odd behaviour. And others considered him completely mad but they themselves were simply too pernickety, and, besides, there is always something strange about an unusual person or otherwise he would not be so.

Uncle once got a job as a shop-window dresser and within a short time transformed the outward appearance of all the shops in our town. He replaced the drab shelves crammed with all sorts of goods by spacious, modern displays consisting of only a few attractive items. He decorated others like colourful stained-glass panels, creating the effect of huge kaleidoscopes. What's more, he put nothing inside these windows, implying that the shop in question had no need to advertise its goods.

Uncle's windows were a huge success. So dazzling were they that you simply could not pass them by. Even window-shopper could not resist going inside and buying something or other. The shops started overfulfilling their plans and uncle was, of course, generously remunerated. His first wages went on paying off debts and then on buying a car.

"You've got to spend money on impressions," he declared. "I need a car as much as the breath of life. I'm going to drive about, observing life everywhere. When you go away somewhere, time passes more slowly and when you're gone a week, it seems more like a year because so many things always happen."

Uncle bought a clapped-out old banger with crooked wheels. Even so, after purchasing this "gem", uncle, as it were, rose to the highest rank of people who owned their own means of trasnport. To start off with, all uncle did was lubricate his banger with oil, dismantle its various parts and wash them in kerosene. He hardly ever went out

in it and never took passengers. He usually started up the engine, listened to how it was running, and then glanced anxiously at his shed-cum-garage which threatened to collapse from the vibrations. Whenever I popped into his makeshift garage, he was always sitting in the semi-darkness and washing various screws by a kerosene lamp which sent a black thread of soot up towards the ceiling. Incidentally, he was forever picking up these screws in the streets and carried them about in his pockets like a little boy, chuckling: "Children have toys and so do adults!" Yes, he was probably right. In any case, car owners certainly never have a dull moment. Because of the car uncle frequently forgot about his friends and work. And if you ask me, this banger was one of the main reasons why uncle did not marry for, you see, it took away all his time. He did not even have time to look for a wife. However, I should mention here that uncle had still not given up hope of finding one. At any rate, the inside of the banger was always decorated with pin-ups of various film stars like Lyubov Orlova, Dina Durban and Mary Pickford. What's more, they often changed—not because uncle was fickle but simply because his requirements were always increasing. Along with the pin-ups of film actresses on the dashboard there was a sign which always scared the living daylight out of me: "Don't nap at the wheel or you'll wake up in the next world!"

As time went by, uncle started driving around more and more often. True, he was always forgetting to pour petrol into the tank and water into the radiator and so the car was always spluttering and billowing smoke, depending on what precisely he had forgotten to pour into it at the time.

Uncle's banger was very unreliable and sometimes veered to one side when he had no intention of even turning the wheel, and at others simply conked out, and was then very hard to budge. Uncle used to press the starter button, turn the starting crank, and call over passersby to help push-start it but nothing ever helped. The car stood rooted to the spot. Fortunately, knowledgeable people always showed up at such moments. First of all, they would

stand at a distance and sympathetically or ironically watch uncle battling away. Then they would come up and start giving advice and finally roll up their sleeves and set to. The numbers of helpers gradually grew, each with his own idea of repairing the car, based on many years of experience. They often started arguing among themselves but, after joining forces, eventually got the car started again. Uncle would drive off and his helpers, fused with fighting spirit, would go on proving they were right to each other for a long time.

These strangers who lend a hand are really amazing! Forgetting everything else, they can spend hours taking your car apart or watching you fishing and helping out with the net at difficult moments. And, most importantly, they never expect anything in return.

After running the car in, uncle started giving lifts to friends, and that meant me most. I, incidentally, was uncle's very first passenger. He used to drive in a most bizarre manner. For instance, as he was riding along, he would glance through a newspaper, change his clothes, shave with a mechanical razor and sing songs. And if he was singing a cheerful one, we would race along at such a speed that pedestrians would scatter in all directions and if it was sad, we would crawl along at a snail's pace. And he used to stop under every bridge we came to and make a wish. He would keep muttering something while the people behind blew their horns but he could not have cared less and only moved on when he had finished. Finally, he loved giving everybody lifts. If someone was walking along the road, he would break sharply and offer them a ride.

But as soon as the stranger took hold of the door-handle, he would add, "Only on one condition: you tell me an interesting story."

After a moment's hesitation, the stranger would grin and climb in and always tell him a story on the way.

In retrospect, I now think that uncle's condition was simply a way of finding an interesting subject for his work. In fact, I'm convinced of this as I was always riding around with him and on more than one occasion noticed how

long he spent questioning his passenger about everything.

True, knowing how kind uncle was, some people tried to use his car for their own practical purposes. As soon as he dropped by on them, they would ask, "Are you in your car?" and if uncle nodded, they would at once ask, "I say, old man, do help me out! I've got to take such-and-such to so-and-so this very minute!"

A few months after acquiring his car, uncle decided to make a tour of the country and set about buying numerous road maps and car maintenance manuals. But that was all he bought because, as he put it: "It'll be more interesting this way. When trips are too organised, you miss out on the most important thing—adventures."

After planning his route, uncle started looking round for a travelling companion with the following requirements in mind: he had to understand the car as well as uncle, be quite thin, that is, not take up too much room in the car, have a good singing voice, understand art and, most importantly, have an easy-going character and a sense of humor.

After taking a detached view of myself, I came to the conclusion that I fitted the bill exactly. What's more, to my mind, I had a great many other merits as well. I went to see uncle and proposed myself as a travelling companion. As always, uncle listened to me attentively. By the way, this is a rare gift. Most people are only good at listening to themselves but uncle listened to others, too. He never interrupted a person speaking to him and always looked him keenly in the eye without a trace of irony.

Uncle pondered over my offer for a long time, pacing up and down with his hands behind his back, snorting and frowning, and then announced that for his first trip he could most likely make do with someone with fewer good qualities but that he would definitely invite me on a longer and more dangerous trip.

After failing to find anyone suitable, uncle finally set off on his own. And that was the last we saw or heard of him for a whole month and then one day he suddenly appeared in our street with a rucksack on his back...

"This is all that's left of my car," he told me, nodding to the rucksack.

It appeared that somewhere in the Caucasus uncle had got out of the car to photograph the mountains at sunset, pointed his camera at some distant peaks, set the focus and pressed the button and then turned round to find his car had vanished. He had apparently forgotten to leave the hand-brake on and while he was taking photographs, the car had rolled very gently over a precipice.

Soon after his return uncle became a strong opponent of all types of transport in general.

"Tranport's ever so unreliable," he would say. "Planes depend on the weather. Trains are always packed. You get sea-sick on ships. Cars need petrol and spare parts. No, thanks! Don't even talk to me about transport. I go everywhere on foot for it's the simplest and most reliable way of getting about. You never let yourself down." And then he would always add, "I don't expect everyone to agree. After all, there're as many viewpoints as there are opinions. Buy yourselves cars, by all means, and drive about to your heart's content! Only mind you don't regret it later!"

A Wonderful Fellow

All my childhood I dreamed of having two things: music and a bicycle. By music I meant a good radio, or, if the worst came to the worst, a gramophone. However, our family did not even have a radio. More than anything else in the world my father loved peace and quiet. He found out the latest news from the newspapers, and the only music he listened to was the doleful twanging of Uncle Fedya's guitar coming from the house opposite. After hitting the bottle every evening, Uncle Fedya would start strumming his monotonous melodies. You can imagine what it sounded like if even the dogs crawled away into the outsheds, not to mention what it did to people! It made them so depressed that many were taken physically ill.

Only father, hearing Uncle Fedya, would carry a chair onto the porch and settle down with a smile. Sometimes he closed his eyes and nodded in time with the music, and when Uncle Fedya finished strumming, said with a deep sigh, "Now, that's music I understand!"

But I needed cheerful, noisy music that would bolster my self-esteem and help me not to give up hope of carrying out my numerous plans. Among my favourites were the marches from the films "The Cheerful Lads" and "Tractor-drivers".* Marches were always playing in my head and I used to sing them to myself first thing in the morning. During the day while father was away at work I would shout them out at the top of my voice. The other people in the house were always telling me off but I took no notice. When I was already rather tired in the afternoons, I would sing quietly and then under my breath when father came home in the evenings.

Many years have passed since then but my tastes haven't changed. I still love marches, only from other films.

Things were easier as far as the bicycle was concerned. You see, my father was an engineer at the compressor factory. He had a lot of work and even drew drafts at home in the evenings, carrying out orders for the bakery and tea-sorting factory. We were a large family and as long as I remember, we were always in debt. Some people used to spread rumours about father doing hack-work on the side but this wasn't true. All his life father was honest and very proud of his honesty, and conversations about hack-work used to make his blood boil.

"We may be poor but, to make up for it, we're honest and all get on well," he would declare. "It's not only what a person's achieved that's important but also the way he's done it. And take no notice of the gossip. Your father's been honest all his life and has never gone in for hack-work. Hack-work can't be called proper work because it's done any old how. But, you see, I do everything conscientiously and if I do something badly, it's because I don't know how to do it."

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* Soviet films of the 1930 s.— *Tr.*

In the evenings mother and I would slave away at the drafts and help father out. Mother would put in the scale while I drew arrows which, unlike most adults, I was very good at. Uncle Fedya's arrows, for instance, were thick and blob-like while granny's looked more like crow's feet. Mine, on the other hand, were sharp like Red Indians' spears. I am still just as good at them and can draw drafts, too, but not so well. But my arrows are really superb! By drawing arrows, as a child I immortalised myself in many of father's drafts and in return father promised to buy me a bicycle, that is, a second-hand one, of course.

Father was a man of his word and never forgot his promises. One Sunday he patted me on the back and off we set to the market and he let me sing marches all the way.

Second-hand shops did not exist before the war and marked-down goods were sold at markets. You could buy anything you liked there from pins and keys to motorbikes and furniture. These markets were usually crammed full of all sorts of junk such as chipped pottery and statuettes, faded, threadbare carpets, broken book-stands, handbags and shelves... However, sometimes among all the rubbish you could find valuable things such as rare books, old paintings in ornate frames, Chinese crockery and so on.

When we arrived at the market, trade was already in full swing and five minutes later we were right in the heart of it. All around people were shouting, "Who needs a jacket?! In perfect nick! Real dandy! Never'll wear out!" And: "Here's a unique item! Pushkin's ink-pot! Buy it now—you won't regret it!"

Also on sale were English gramophones, very rare electric stoves and priceless caskets. Advertising at the market was free-for-all. A slow salesman with a quiet voice was wasting his time there. Timid vendors usually engaged someone with a booming voice and sometimes even false buyers who would pretend to be buying something but, in fact, only jack up prices.

On the far side of the market we at last caught sight of the bicycle vendors, standing on their own by a smooth stretch of ground where the bicycles were being tested

out. Little boys whose trouser bottoms were clipped with clothes pegs were sitting on a fence nearby, and they were only too willing to try out the bicycles for greenhorns.

That day five bicycles were on sale, including a wonderful shiny English model with narrow tyres and nickel-plated mudguards, which we at once turned away from so as not to feel disappointed. Standing next to it was a really ancient small model of an unknown make with an incredibly large chain-drive and a pear-shaped horn, which we also did not bother looking at. And, finally, there were three more or less ordinary bicycles. I rushed towards them but father immediately stopped me.

"Don't go near them," he whispered. "You must never hurry over this sort of thing. What's the point? We've got plenty of time. Let's walk round, have a look and then choose."

Father started walking up and down near these three bicycles with his hands behind his back, pretending to be simply strolling about but I could see he was glancing askance at the vendors. Then he began walking round in smaller and smaller circles, listening carefully to the vendors' conversations with prospective buyers and smiling knowingly. For some reason or other, he only looked at the vendors and completely ignored the bicycles. When I called him over and asked about this, he scowled and exclaimed irritably, "You don't understand anything! They're all exactly the same. What really matters is the salesmen. You've got to get their measure. They can take you for such a ride here," father clicked his tongue, shook his head meaningfully and then suddenly guffawed: "But I won't be had! I'm an old hand. I can see through the lot of them. That lad over there in the cap's the best of the bunch. He's got kind eyes and an open smile. You can tell at once he's an honest fellow. He's probably a student. Wait here and I'll go and find out."

Father started walking round in circles, pausing slightly by the lad in the cap, and then came back to me.

"Well, what did I tell you?! He is a student. He's writing a diploma and if it wasn't for that, he wouldn't sell

it for anything. Let's go over and try his bike out."

From a distance the young man in a close-fitting track-suit and long-peaked cap looked like a sportsman. He was clean-shaven and had a permanent smile on his face. When we came up, he hugged me and said cheerfully, "Well, so it's for you? You're all right. I wouldn't give it away to anybody else but, oh well, I will to you. Look after my faithful companion. It's served me for ten years without ever being repaired and it'll serve you another twenty. Oh, if only it wasn't for my diploma!.."

The fellow pushed me towards the bicycle and turned away. I took hold of the handlebars, turned the bicycle round, pushed off and jumped onto the saddle.

It was hard testing it out on such a small patch of ground but I managed to notice that the wheels were very buckled and the rear cog was creaking. I rode up to my father and told him so.

"Buckled! Nonsense!" exclaimed the boy, laughing. "They can be straightened in a jiffy. Easy as pie! See! And I thought you were a professional but it seems you're only an amateur."

"Oh, you didn't understand him correctly," replied father, taking my part. "He was only joking! That's right, isn't it?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"As for the cog," the fellow continued. "I made it creak on purpose by removing a couple of ball-bearings. It's more fun this way for it crackles like a little engine when you're riding along."

The fellow winked at me and roared with laughter.

"Let's look at the other bicycles," I whispered to my father but he did not hear me as he was also laughing and shaking the fellow's hand. I tried to drag him aside but he suddenly said, "You are funny! Some may not but I can see who's a rogue and who's a decent fellow among this lot. Just look at them standing there and whispering about something. And, anyway, there's no point trying them out. Our fellow's the best of the bunch. He's a wonderful fellow! And so is his bike. I liked the look of it at once."

He turned towards the fellow, shook his hand again and reached for his money.

Outside the market father said, "Come on, get on the crossbar and we'll ride home together."

But as soon as we pushed off, the chain snapped.

"Bother it!" said father. "Well, never mind, it's just our bad luck."

While we were mending the chain, the tyres went flat.

"That's odd!" said father, frowning.

As soon as we had pumped the tyres up, a pedal flew off and the saddle's spring broke. Father mopped his perspiring brow, sighed and said quietly. "Right, ride home by yourself. We'll sort things out there."

But I had only gone a few yards when something really dreadful happened: the crossbar cracked and the bicycle snapped in two and I went crashing to the ground. I got to my feet, brushed the dust off and picked up half of the bicycle. Then father came up and took the other half and we set off home—I, sobbing silently, and father, smiling bitterly.

Every Day

Father did, however, manage to fix the bicycle after a while. He took it off to his factory and had its frame welded together, its spokes straightened and cog set right. It still looked decrepit but, to make up for that, was easy to ride.

For a long time I could not ride it enough. In the early morning I would drag it out and ride along the cool deserted street. As soon as I turned into a wide street with trams running along it, I would start pedalling faster and the grey ribbon of the road covered with patches and oil slicks would stream faster and faster towards me.

Sometimes I rode over to the stadium and raced along its cinder track or cycled to the stream and sped along its narrow rickety bridges or rode out to the woods

and wandered down its winding paths. How wonderful it was! Along with the bicycle I had acquired a feeling of ease and a sense of limitless freedom. Nobody minded me getting on my bicycle whenever I liked and setting off in whatever direction I cared to. In those days I came home only for lunch, gulped down a bowl of soup and then sped off again on my bicycle.

And this is how I spent all my mornings, afternoons and evenings. Sometimes I even cycled before bedtime just in case it rained the next day. I most enjoyed riding along a length of street between the last but one and terminal tram stops, passing across a meadow and the dam which a blue-sided bus with shiny back number plates used to trundle over. The edges of the dam were lined with old limes whose branches intertwined over the road. And I used to race down this green tunnel with a dense canopy overhead and the sunlight only just filtering through.

I usually rode out to the dam in the early morning when the wind was drifting soundlessly along the roads and the limes smelt of honey. Just before the dam there was a bus stop where the same passengers waited for the tram every morning at the same time. I knew many of them by sight and so did they. For instance, I remember three talkative fat men. Catching sight of me in the distance, one of them used to nudge his companions in the sides and all three would start giving me advice by gesticulating. One would spin his hands round wildly as if to say, "Come on, lad, get a move on!" Another would raise his head slightly and pull his stomach in by way of saying, "Don't forget to sit up straight!" And the third would deliberately give me a dazzling smile, trying his best to show me that pluck and self-confidence were what mattered most in sport.

There was also a taciturn middle-aged couple who always stood aloof and gazed pensively in different directions. And after I sped by, rather sad smiles would appear first on her face and then on his. After the stop I used to turn off at the crossroads and race along the sunny side of the road towards the dam. As soon

as I passed the crossroads, a moped with fishing rods and a net attached to its frame would fly out of a side-street, crackling drily. It was ridden by an old man in a straw hat and round glasses who was always beaming.

The old man and I would draw up to the dam at the same moment and then the most interesting thing would happen: I would suddenly tear ahead. The old man's moped would roar along, making a terrific din, but still fall further and further behind. Glancing round, I could see the old man's dismayed face although he tried his hardest not to show he was losing and went on looking at the road over the tops of his glasses and smiling just as before.

Half-way across the dam I was already beginning to flag but by this time there was already a gap of about five hundred metres between us and I let myself relax slightly. I even got off several times and did a few exercises to limber up but as soon as the old man drew fairly close, I would run my bicycle along and jump onto the saddle. After that, however, I never managed to take such a strong lead again because I was beginning to tire after such a fierce start to the race, and my legs and back started aching more and more. Mustering all my strength and gritting my teeth, I continued to retain the lead but then the old man started catching up. Behind me the crackling engine grew louder and clearer and then alongside I caught sight of the ends of the rods, the front wheel and, finally, the old man himself.

He would look at me over his glasses and grin amicably and although I pedalled with all my might, he still overtook me. I grew particularly angry at such moments if a tram was rumbling by because someone on board was bound to shout out, "Keep your head down, fatty! Slow down, nobody's behind you now!"

Although I took no notice, I still felt terribly hurt.

After overtaking me, the old man would turn round and beckon to me to ride behind him but I would at once turn away and facially express my total contempt for the role of following the leader.

Every day he used to ride out of the side-street just as I was crossing the crossroads. At that time I presumed this was a sheer coincidence but now I am inclined to believe it was clearly a piece of cunning on the old man's part.

Our races along the road ended sadly. One morning I passed the stop as usual but the old man did not drive out of the side-street. After riding on a few yards, I turned round and crossed the crossroads again but he still failed to appear. Then I got off and decided to wait for him but he had still not turned up half an hour later. The same happened the next day and the day after that. Then I heard he had been knocked down by a lorry. Whether this was true or not, I cannot say, but from then on my rides to the dam became totally pointless. I tried going there several times but it was not the same any more.

And I only started going there again the following summer and that was because I met my "princess" there.

Slender and long-legged, with jet-black hair and crystal-clear eyes, she was the owner of a truly wonderful blue racing cycle which streaked through the air like blue lightning.

And she rode like a princess, too, erect, her head held high, and looking straight ahead. I cannot say now exactly whether it was the girl or her bicycle that I liked more but at that time I used to hide behind the limes and spend a long time gazing at her. Every morning she used to ride with her books on the rack behind to the technical college on the outskirts of town and return home in the late afternoon. Catching sight of her, time and time again I intended to jump onto my bicycle and do all sorts of stunts for, you see, I rode fantastically well. I could ride without hands and feet, lie down on the saddle and turn the pedals with my hands, ride back-to-front, with my eyes shut, and balance on the spot.

I went through these tricks countless times in my head and now all I had to do was demonstrate them to the girl.

As she was drawing up to my ambush, I came out onto the road with my bicycle several times but as she came closer, I always became rooted to the spot for some reason or other and she would race past without even glancing in my direction.

But one day I got the better of myself and catching sight of her blue bicycle, rode out onto the roadside and was just about to show her my act when I lost my balance and fell off. I had done all these tricks countless times before and never fallen off but it would just have to happen that I came a cropper right in front of her. I imagined she would burst out laughing but she simply rang her bell and then disappeared out of sight.

Next day, as I was pedalling over to the stream for a swim, and gazing at the road ahead, the swifts flitting in front of my wheels, and the farmers' carts loaded with fruit and vegetables rattling towards me, all of a sudden the blue bicycle streaked out from a side-street and the "princess", wearing a white dress and a crown of ox-eyed daisies, overtook me and smiled. I changed gears and my bicycle began squeaking and creaking while my "princess" blithely sailed past me and faded into the distance. A fair way off she suddenly slowed down and I at once went to overtake her but a lorry with a trailer hooted madly behind and I turned sharply towards the roadside. The lorry went roaring past and its driver shook his fist at me. I drew even closer towards the verge and suddenly felt a loud bump and riding off the dam, flew over the handle-bars and crashed into a ditch, tearing my trousers and scraping my leg. My front wheel was badly buckled and my rear one shaped like an egg. I picked my bicycle up and was climbing onto the dam when I suddenly heard someone ask, "Are you badly hurt?"

Standing over me was the "princess", her dress fluttering in the wind. She came up, looked at my leg, took a handkerchief out of her pocket and bandaged my knee while I blushed and looked away.

"What's your name?" she asked, smiling, "Get on behind and I'll give you a lift home, you dare-devil!"

I slung my bicycle over my shoulder, got onto the rack behind her and we raced back to our street. I was knocked about and the gusty wind tore at my shirt and the "princess's" apple-scented hair, beating across my face.

"Hold tight!" she cried, turning round and laughing. And her laughter and the fragrance of her hair made me happy and light-hearted.

Just Another Summer

As luck would have it, the "princess" soon moved to our street. It all happened like this.

One day as I was cycling towards the crossroads on my way to the dam, she caught me up on her bicycle and riding alongside, said, "I say, you couldn't possibly help mother and me load our things tomorrow?"

"Are you leaving?"

"No, we've exchanged flats with someone living in Poplar Street."

At the arranged time next day I set off for the "princess's" house, called in on Bob on the way and took him along to help out. When we arrived, a lorry had already been there and various trunks and bundles were standing nearby...

In my opinion, moving is always interesting and from time to time, simply essential. Firstly, because you get rid of many things you are used to but do not need; secondly, because whether you like it or not you start a new life, and, thirdly and most importantly, something good, as a rule, comes of the change.

When we drove up to our street in the lorry, inquisitive faces started appearing at all the windows. Uncle Fedya and then my uncle helped carry the things, and within half an hour they had all been taken indoors, and our new neighbours were installed in our street.

Olga was a good "princess". Later that day she allowed

Bob and me to ride her bicycle and gave us an adventure book each as a present in the evening.

It was summertime and both our school and Olga's technical college had broken up for the holidays. We started spending all day long together for, you see, nothing brings people together as much as idleness. It all began with catapults. While Bob and I were flying a kite one day, it suddenly got hitched to a wire and started to waggle this way and that as if caught in a lasso. At that moment Olga came outside and said, "Your kite's had it. Make a new one."

"Rubbish!" I barked and got my catapult out to free the kite from the wires.

I had only just put a pebble in the sling when a gust of wind suddenly freed the entangled kite and it soared upwards and hung motionlessly high in the sky. However, as I was still holding onto my catapult, I fired at the kite and the pebble pierced a hole in it.

"Terrific!" Olga exclaimed, clicking her tongue. "Do teach me to fire like that!"

"We're going off fishing now," said Bob.

"Oh! I'll come, too!"

"But do you know how to fish?"

"You'll teach me. I'm quick off the mark, you'll see!"

We set off fishing on our bicycles: Olga on her racing cycle, and Bob and me on mine.

There were so many fish in the spot where we fished that you could drag a net along with your eyes shut and still catch something. However, it was hard fishing with a rod because the whole river was covered with duckweed and when you cast your rod, even the float disappeared among the slimy green weeds. For a long time we did not know how to fish there but then Uncle Fedya told us to go into the woods, cut down some juniper twigs, make a ring out of them, clear away the duckweed with a stick and throw the ring into the clear patch of water and fish through the ring.

We settled down under the trees. The sun was at its highest point, and it was very hot. Burning rays of sunlight were filtering through the dusty grey leaves. We taught

Olga how to cast her rod with the bait, as high as possible upstream, and wait for it to float past and start creeping closer to the bank, and then lift the line out and keep recasting it until she got a bite. While demonstrating our fishing method, Bob and I patiently put up with Olga's mistakes and remembered to hold onto her elbow in time so that she did not fall into the water as she was casting her rod. We treated her in a condescending manner although she was in her late teens and we were still small boys.

What I like about anglers is that it is skill that counts among them and not status or age. Fishing next to our professor one day, Bob kept muttering to himself, "The silly fool, what a ridiculous way he casts his rod!"

The first to catch a fish was Bob and it was a roach the size of his palm. Surprisingly, the second roach was caught by Olga. It was slightly smaller than Bob's but she hooked it quite expertly. Then Bob caught another little roach and then at last I had a stroke of luck and, what's more, the best of the whole summer, and caught a kilogram chub. While I was pulling it in, my hazel rod bent like a barrel hoop and I even thought it would snap under the weight but it did not let me down.

After such a catch all our spirits rose, and mine especially so. To keep happy I even burst into song. As we were in no hurry to get home, we wheeled our bicycles and walked barefoot through the hot, light, powdery dust. Bumble-bees wove patterns in the air ahead, bright-coloured butterflies flitted here and there like flying flowers, delicate-stemmed bluebells and carnations filling the air with the most wonderful fragrances.

Then we mounted our bicycles and rode over to the dam. Bob and I raced along in a straight line, ploughing through the foliage and flowers while Olga rode slowly, going round almost every flower.

From then on we went fishing every day. Olga was soon casting her rod no worse than us and often even better in as far as she was taller and found it easier casting the bait over the riverside reeds and grass. We got so used to fishing with her that when she could not go with us one day, the whole trip was completely

ruined. Within half an hour we had got fed up of the river, our rods and even the fish we had caught...

Sometimes the three of us went to the stadium or the cinema to see our favourite actors, Aleinikov and Zharov, to Gorky Park's reading room, or to an ice-cream café or just out for a walk. We would wander through unfamiliar districts of the town, looking at the houses and peeping into windows, trying to guess who lived there. We would walk along with Olga, like a queen, in the middle and us, like faithful pages, on either side. Incidentally, after getting to know her better, I anointed Olga a queen. In those days I doled out titles quite freely but of all the people I gave them to, Olga was the only one who bore hers with dignity.

When we walked down streets, all the passers-by used to turn round and stare—not at us, of course, but at Olga—so beautiful was she. And every time someone stared at her, I used to almost burst with pride and at once feel taller and stronger. And, of course, I was really convinced that there were only two queens in the world — Queen Elizabeth of England and Olga of our street.

Although a queen, Olga was also a loyal friend. No matter who invited her to the cinema or a dance, she never went. How many times we felt men staring after us and heard them exclaim admiringly, "My, what a beauty! But who's that with her? Who're those ragamuffins?" or: "What an angel! Fancy her being with those little scamps!"

Every time we heard these insults, Bob and I would grit our teeth and clench our fists in anger, and get ready to attack the offenders but Olga would put her arms round our shoulders and say calmly, "Take no notice. They're just jealous of our friendship."

One day out fishing Olga said, "One of my friends will be arriving soon. I'll introduce you. You'll like him and the four of us will go fishing together—he's a keen angler, too."

"Where's he now?"

"In the army."

Olga put down her rod, squatted on her heels and gazed pensively at the water.

"We'll go fishing every day!" she said, jumping up and clapping her hands. "Know what? Let's make him a rod. He'll be ever so delighted!"

"But when's he arriving?" I asked.

"In about a week's time or maybe a bit earlier."

To start off with, I was not much looking forward to the imminent arrival of Olga's friend but then I decided it would be more fun fishing in a foursome than a threesome. "Besides," I thought, "Olga's friend's only going to go fishing with us and we can decide later on whether to take him to all the other places or not. And then," I concluded, "Olga won't be his close friend now because they were friends some time ago whereas we're friends with her now."

Later that day we set off into the woods to get a rod, chose the smoothest and most flexible switch we could find and took it back to Olga's house. Then we stripped its bark off and stood it out to dry in the sun. Later Bob brought a line over and I supplied a hook and float. When it was ready, the rod was put in a corner to wait for its owner's arrival.

The next morning I was awoken by Olga's shout. Looking out the window, I caught sight of her, and Bob and a tall dark-haired fellow in an army uniform, all carrying rods...

I threw my clothes on, grabbed my tackle and tore outside.

"Meet my friend!" said Olga as I came up.

"Valeri," the fellow introduced himself and shook my hand. He had a rather husky voice and a serious expression.

"Well, and now we're going to show you our fishing place, aren't we, boys?" She took the fellow by the elbow.

I did not like the way she said "boys" as she had always called us "chums" before. But now out of the blue it was "boys". I felt she was deliberately stressing the difference in our ages. And, what's more, she spoke to her friend in a very polite, formal manner. "So he can't really be a close friend," I mused. As far

as I was concerned, true friendship tore down all social barriers.

We went fishing on our bicycles: Bob and me on mine and Olga and Valeri on hers. Valeri rode with Olga on the crossbar and whispered something in her ear all the way, and she kept laughing. Every now and then she remembered about Bob and me and, waving her arm, called, "Catch us up!" and then started listening to Valeri again and laughing.

Bob and I rode along in silence. I was not feeling in a particularly good mood. I did not like Olga's friend. I had imagined he would be cheerful and sociable but he was only sociable with Olga and did not seem to even notice us. Catching them up, I noticed his ears stuck out too much and he had round shoulders. Then I spotted he was bandy-legged. And the longer I looked at him, the more faults I found in him.

That day the dull and windy weather was in keeping with my mood. As soon as we reached our fishing spot, the rain started casting rings all over the surface of the river.

"Never mind, rain's lucky," said Valeri and set to unravelling his line.

We started doing the same although we might well not have bothered for neither of us hardly had any luck that day, and neither did Olga. Only Valeri was lucky. First, he caught two perches, then a small roach and then a stickleback. It was like witchcraft. We were fishing only a couple of feet away but did not have a single bite while he caught one fish after another. It was only towards the end that I noticed he was fishing very close to the surface, and after lowering my float, I immediately caught a stickleback. But even this did not raise my spirits. On the contrary, after realising that Valeri had been keeping his fishing technique a secret from us, I took an instant dislike to him. At that time I was convinced that every good angler was always a good friend as well.

After a while it started pouring with rain and we decided to go home. Back in our street, Valeri turned to

Olga and said, "Shall we go to the cinema this evening?"

"Let's! Only it's a pity the boys can't."

"Yes, that is a pity," agreed Valeri and they exchanged meaningful glances.

Now this was not at all like Olga and certainly not worthy of a "queen". Knowing that we were too young to go to evening performances, she could have refused to go, too. Realising this at the last moment, she said in an apologetic tone, "You won't be angry if the two of us go, will you? I've heard it's ever such an interesting film."

"No, do go," said Bob. "We won't mind."

I said nothing.

It was sunny the next morning. At about ten Olga came round and greeted me more enthusiastically than usual.

"Hello!" she said. "The weather's wonderful today, isn't it? Where are we going?"

"How was the film?" I snapped, turning away.

"Not much good," she replied, pulling a wry face. "I even regret going."

"You're no friend of ours," I said. "Going without us."

"Oh yes, I am," Olga retorted. "I didn't want to go to the silly film at all. It was just that everyone had said it was good and so I went along. I'm just too trusting."

She smiled and, putting her hand on my shoulder, said,

"I thought about you both all the time. I even dreamed of you last night."

I imagined Valeri and Olga walking home after the cinema and jerked my shoulder away.

"Stop sucking up to me!"

She blinked confusedly and said quietly, "You're right, it probably was nasty of me but I won't do it again. Promise."

This did not cheer me up either. If she had kept on defending herself, I might have decided she was not so guilty after all but she had confirmed my suspicions by confessing her guilt.

However, I still could not be angry at her for long. As soon as she fell silent, I started talking and then she told me about some funny book or other and I

forgot all about my grudge. Then we went over to Bob's and the three of us started flying kites. Valeri appeared at midday and invited us all to the park to ride the merry-go-rounds. Olga and Bob jumped at the idea. I was not too keen on going with Valeri but went along so as not to be a spoil-sport.

It was a hot day and we all felt thirsty before we even reached the park.

"There's some excellent water fountains in the park," I said although everyone already knew that.

"Why wait?! Let's have a drink now," said Valeri, going up to a soft drinks kiosk.

"Four fruit sodas," he said to the saleswoman.

I was very thirsty but had no money and certainly did not intend drinking a soda that Valeri had bought.

"I don't want a fizzy drink," I said as casually as possible. "The water's better in the park."

"Oh, have just a drop," said Olga, handing me a glass.

The fizzy drink tickled my nostrils pleasantly but I got the better of myself and turned away.

"It's lovely," said Bob, savouring the sweet drink, but I gave him a hard stare.

There was obviously something fierce about my expression because he stopped drinking at once and looking at me, muttered, "No, it's nasty. You know, I once drank some real beer..."

He said this with such a foolish expression on his face that Olga burst out laughing and Valeri nearly choked, and even I could not help sniggering.

After treating us all to a soda, Valeri decided to amaze Olga even more with his generosity.

"Shall we go to the shooting gallery and then on to the Hall of Laughs?" he suggested.

"No, let's do what we arranged, and go to the merry-go-rounds," said Olga.

I gave her a grateful look and raced over to the free-of-charge merry-go-rounds in the square.

After riding them to our hearts' content, we went over to another part of the park to play hide-and-seek. I was chosen to hunt for the others first but as I was

counting up to ten, Bob came over and said, "Don't bother! They've already run away."

"What do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"What I said. They've run away from us, that's all."

I could not believe it and started running from one bush to the next but they really had disappeared. We sat down on a bench and waited for them but they only appeared half an hour later. Olga was first to turn up.

"Where have you been?" Bob and I called out in a chorus.

"In the pavilion."

"You were with him in the pavilion?" I asked in horror.

"Yes, so what?" Olga asked in surprise, "We hid there and waited but you never came."

Then Valeri came up.

"Didn't we hide well from you?" he said, and glancing at the setting sun, added, "Perhaps it's time to go home?"

I angrily bit my lips all the way home. At Olga's house Valeri leaned towards her and whispered something.

"They're arranging to go to the cinema," Bob said quietly.

"Like hell they are!" I muttered.

Bob and I decided to follow them: we said good-bye and pretended to go off home but met again a few minutes later, crept into Olga's back garden, hid in the bushes and waited. All was quiet and the garden was pervaded with the fragile stillness of dusk. Half an hour passed, and then an hour, but there was still no sign of Valeri. We were already getting pins and needles in our legs when suddenly Olga came out onto the porch, swept a dark shawl over her shoulders and began walking towards us. We huddled closer together and held our breath but about ten yards away, she turned aside and walked over to a bench where, lo and behold, Valeri was sitting. We had no idea how he had managed to creep into the garden so quietly. She sat down beside him and they started talking about something. It was growing dark and their silhouettes merged with the leafy backcloth but I still could clearly see him move closer to her and

stroke her cheek. And then all of a sudden she kissed him. They remained sitting there until some radio pips sounded somewhere and an announcer said, "It is now ten fifteen", and then she stood up and disappeared indoors.

Next day Bob and I were sitting on the corner of our street, and silently watching Uncle Kolya the shoemaker at work when Olga came up and said hello in exactly the same way as usual.

"We know all about you!" Bob said at once in an accusing tone.

"What?" she asked, blushing. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"Don't fib!" I almost shrieked.

"You kissed him!" Bob said, grinning.

She blushed even deeper and her chin began quivering with emotion.

"Don't be angry with me!" she pleaded. "I was home by ten."

"Ten fifteen!" I retorted, making what I thought was an important correction and giving her a fierce look. I was terribly worked up.

"Oh well, perhaps it was that late," said Olga, shrugging her shoulders. "Do stop nagging!"

"You've betrayed us!" said Bob and got up and went off down the street.

"No, I haven't..." said Olga confusedly. "I haven't..."

"Oh yes, you have!" I said and went off after Bob.

I walked slowly to the end of the street without turning round once although I could feel her stare on my back all the time.

At That Glorious Time...

I had many interests in my childhood but sooner or later dropped them all, and mostly before I had got really keen on them. More often than not, I was simply put off by the first obstacles I encountered. And the only

one I enjoyed for a long time was riding trams. Even when I was bought a bicycle and no longer needed a means of transport, I still went on taking tram rides. I love them to this day and even when I am simply out on a walk and spot a red tram rumbling along the tracks, I always ride it for a couple of stops.

Every time I asked father for tram money, he would say, "I won't give you a bean. You'd do better to read than loaf about on trams."

Then he would start listing the books I ought to read. One day I took his advice and settled down with a book. I read avidly and got through three thick tomes in a day. However, I only read the main parts and skipped through all the descriptive passages and boring monologues, not to mention the love scenes which I simply leafed through. The word "love" was no longer a mystery for me then as I was in love with Tanya, a girl from a nearby street. Nothing good came of this love of mine, however. It only took away my time and made me restless.

I soon rightfully proved to father that I was gaining nothing from reading, and that the time I was wasting could be better spent out in the yard. Father then replied that I simply was not reading properly and had to reflect over what was written, make my own conclusions and read between the lines. These vague arguments convinced me even more that I was right, and I went on trying to prove to father that one tram ride was worth dozens of books. Why, as you rode along, life, the whole town, and all the latest news was revealed before your very eyes. In short, I tried to show him that knowledge drawn from life was more important than that drawn from books.

After realising I was wasting my time with father, I had a go at my mother and tried to prove to her that I needed tram rides as much as the breath of life and that cutting down my pocket money could have a serious effect on my intellectual development. In those days I was always trying to prove something to someone. Even to my granny I had to prove that my parents were treating me in a biassed manner. Granny did not agree with me but in an attempt to calm me down, shoved some coins into

my hand for a tram ride. I at once rushed off to the stop, got on, took a ticket and, leaning against the back window, watched the rails speeding away into the distance.

I loved riding anything that moved—logs, barrels, gates, roller-skates, scooters, rafts, boats, bicycles—but, most of all, trams. And how I used to jump onto the running board and hang on for dear life! Once, however, I ran up and was just about to jump on when a fat man grabbed hold of me and would not let go. I started yelling and beating him but he only laughed and said, "Never mind! You'll thank me one day when you grow up!" He was such a nice fat man that I remember his face to this very day.

Another time father and I were hurrying to the steam baths and ran up to the stop just as the tram was slowly moving off.

"Oh, well, let's try our luck!" sighed father (it was the first time he had dared do such a thing). "Can you jump on?" And then he suddenly jumped onto the running board very adroitly as if he had done so before.

I grinned and deciding to show off, ran up casually and leapt onto the step without grabbing hold of the carriage, and, what's more, even glanced at my father, trying to see whether he was admiring my skill. But blow me down if my foot didn't miss the step and land on the cobblestones below! And I limped away with a sprained ankle. Seeing me doubled up, father jumped off and came running up and said, "Never mind, never mind! Of course, without practice it's rather hard. Anyhow, it's a habit you'd better do without."

There were a lot of interesting passengers on our tram route. I often met an angler who always told his neighbours the same old yarn about how he once caught a fish as long as his arm. He used to speak in a quiet and rather unnatural way, and kept pausing in mid-sentence, and eavesdropping on his neighbours' conversations and muttering under his breath, "What asses!" Sometimes he could not refrain from butting into other people's conversations, making corrections and adding his own more precise definitions. If you ask me, it wasn't that he was

over-inquisitive but simply wanted to attract attention so as to tell his yarn later on but, perhaps, like any story-teller, he expected others to get the facts straight.

On the tram I also often saw two old women, one of whom was taciturn, quiet-mannered, and dressed all in black frilly lace, and carrying a shabby handbag, and the other, her friend, had a lively and energetic face and corkscrew curls around her ears, and tried to look younger than her age. The latter used to smile at everyone and constantly sigh about her young days. She often used to say her quiet friend, "Remember what I wanted to tell you? Oh yes!", and without waiting for a reply, she would tell her something about someone who lived in the past. And then she would glance reproachfully at young girls and gaze amicably in my direction as if divining the effect her words were having on me. She knew whose support she would get for, you see, I was just at that age when boys particularly loathe girls. However, perhaps she did not have an ulterior motive in mind after all. As I've already said, I was always popular with old women.

Sometimes when the youthful-looking one was strongly criticising today's fashions, one of the other passengers would try to put in a good word for young people and justify their liking for bold, revealing styles. These objections would incense the old woman even more, and she would jump up and start pushing her way towards the exit, muttering angrily. At moments like this what I feared most was that in a fit of temper she would jump off while the tram was still moving but she never forgot to pull the cord and triumphantly alighted only after the tram had come to a complete stand-still. Recalling her now, I am inclined to believe that some women become rather aggressive and belligerent in their latter years. For instance, I knew another old woman who was a real battle-axe. She gained so little satisfaction from bossing her own husband about that she used to shout at others' husbands and complete strangers, too.

Another regular passenger was a young boy carrying aquariums back from market. He always stood with his

legs far apart and his arms tightly wrapped round the glass tanks.

One day I went for a tram ride at midday when the streets where ablaze with light and the tram was completely empty except for a girl standing in front, and reading a book. She was tall and fair, with almond-shaped eyes and a large mouth. I had seen her before. She always got on at the dam, took a ticket, looked to see if it had a lucky number, walked down to the front and always started reading some unhappy romantic Turgenev novel. As soon as the tram reached the stop by the chain bridge, she closed her book and walked up to the door and a tall, fat, ginger-haired fellow would get on, kiss the girl on the cheek and at once start chatting to her. He seemed cheerful and kind to me. At that time I considered fat men were almost always pleasant and auburn-haired ones always so. The girl would stare tenderly and admiringly at him. True, they sometimes quarrelled or stood in silence for a while, holding hands and smiling at something. And even if they looked in my direction, they always looked somewhere beyond me. They used to get off at the crossroads stop.

I grew so used to this pair of sweethearts that I felt something was wrong if I did not see them for a long time. Once, on one of those rainy autumn days the girl got on, looking upset, went to the front of the carriage and leaned her cheek against the glass. By the chain bridge she went up to the door as usual and craning her neck, stared at the people waiting at the stop. Several passengers got on but the auburn-haired fellow was not among them. After that I did not see the girl for a long time. Whenever the tram drew up at the dam, I hoped to catch sight of her but she never appeared. Then I started recalling her less and less and gradually almost forgot her when suddenly one spring day when dazzling streams of water were rippling through the town and steam was rising from the drying asphalt, she jumped onto the tram with a bouquet of mimosa ... and the whole carriage was at once filled with the yellow flowers' sweet fragrance. She smiled at me as though at an old friend, took a ticket and

walked through to the front. Her eyes radiated happiness. As usual she read Turgenev but not as avidly as before. She kept opening and closing the book and smiling at me as if I were a silent witness of an important event. As the chain bridge drew closer, for some reason or other I grew anxious... But the girl jumped off at the stop, turned round and, waving her arm amicably to me, disappeared in the crowd.

The Old Fogy

At one time I terribly wanted to grow rich. Day and night I dreamed of fabulous treasures. I don't exactly remember how it all began but I think it was after reading lots of books about pirates that I started treasure-hunting for days on end. From morning till night I explored all the cellars and attics, and dug up every hillock and suspicious-looking hill like a mole that had gone mad. I thus ruined quite a few vegetable plots and flowerbeds but all to no avail. This ought to have cooled my ardour, it would seem, but I was so sure of finding something in the end that my futile searching only spurred me on and whetted my appetite even more. Apart from discovering various close-lying treasures, I also planned to lay my hands on ones further afield, and studied geographical maps with an end to visiting several remote islands. I was poked fun at but this did not stop me for I was convinced that sooner or later I would become fabulously rich. What's more, I even knew what I would spend all my treasure on. So all I had to do was find it. Sometimes I used to see clusters of precious stones in my trunks so vividly that I felt dizzy. At moments like this my fantasy carried me away into a luxurious paradise where I lived in clover without a care in the world. Then I imagined the people who had laughed at me, apologising, and could see their eyes glinting with envy and greed.

For some reason or other, I thought that wealth would

also bring me fame and power. That's why I often saw myself in the role of a benefactor, generously doling out presents to friends and acquaintances and sometimes even, complete strangers if I saw they obviously admired me, or at any rate, acknowledged my services or, if the worst came to the worst, simply seemed friendly.

I often saw myself as a lenient peacemaker pardoning my enemies—not all, of course, but those whose degree of guilt did not exceed a certain limit.

At that time I saw a lost treasure in every knick-knack lying about, especially if it was shiny. For some odd reason I imagined that all that glittered was gold. True, I made some exceptions to this rule and sometimes picked up even completely plain-looking objects, reckoning that they might be worth something later on. I collected brass nails and edgings, iron pipes, scraps of tin, plugs and tin foil, and carried them all about in my pockets. What's more, I always used to keep my hands in my pockets, too. Other children of my age also went around with their hands in their pockets but simply to seem grown-up and independent whereas I just wanted to touch my treasures all the time. I would have gladly slept with them as well if they had not stuck into my sides.

Seeing me with bulging pockets, mother would always threaten to sew them up and I had to beg her not to. Sometimes my pockets could not take the weight of these heavy objects and split and I would lose one of my treasures. And I suffered each loss as if it were a tragedy. Two years later all these losses already seemed trifling, and this cheers me up slightly now in as far as I still sometimes lose things. True, these losses cannot be compared with past ones.

By the time I was twelve I had stopped digging holes in the ground—not because I had given up hope of ever finding a treasure but because I had discovered a more sensible way of growing rich—by being left a legacy. I started going through all my relatives in my head, weighing up their ages and working out their financial state but after studying the whole of my family tree, I noted with dismay that I could count on nothing. Then

I started tackling the theoretical side of the problem of getting rich and fairly quickly discovered several ways of doing so. At that time I seemed to be one of the first to make these discoveries but instead of keeping quiet about them, on the contrary, I was constantly advertising them and sharing them with every Tom, Dick and Harry.

One of these methods consisted of the following: you had to buy a dog, breed ten puppies every year and then sell them for a colossal sum. This way you could make a fortune in a couple of years. And this was only one of many equally brilliant ideas.

Almost everyone unanimously acknowledged the advantages of these methods, especially how fast they could make you rich. However, some doubted their feasibility and others casually mentioned the risky element to them. But, oddly enough, it was namely these people who later tried out my methods and are now thriving but have, of course, forgotten who they owe their success to.

One person, however, was totally opposed to my plans. The girls called him "Toadie" and "Grumpy" and we boys referred to him as the "Old Fogy". He seemed as old as the hills to us and, more importantly, we could not imagine that he had ever been young.

He was a decrepit old man with a husky voice, a very wrinkled face and screwed-up, twinkling eyes. Whenever I caught his caustic gaze, he seemed to be weighing things up, making conjectures and not simply looking at me. A heavy smoker, he never took his pipe out of his mouth, and when he ran out of pipe tobacco, he smoked whatever else he had—any brand of cigarettes, rollies and thick green cigars with newspaper mouthpieces out of which tufts of rolled tobacco used to stick out.

He would sit on a bench in front of his house, puffing on his pipe day in, day out. All sorts of rumours were spread about him, including one about how he used to walk across the roof of his house in his sleep and fly. Some used to say that he started doing this after his son went missing at the war. Others, were convinced that he did not have a son but had been "bewitched" by the

moon as a child.

The old man lived alone. After living with his old lady for fifty years, and celebrating their golden wedding anniversary, he divorced her, divided the house in two, took all the furniture he needed and moved into the other half. He justified his decision by various arguments, which mostly contradicted each other. And, anyway, he harped on about them so much that everybody started doubting they were true. In the end many came to the conclusion that the only reason for the divorce was that his old lady was also very fond of talking.

Once a week his old friends in our street and others nearby would gather in his house and drink tea. Their old host would talk the most and although quite a few of his guests also enjoyed holding forth, they were never rivals to be reckoned with. For one thing, they paid tribute to his venerable age and, for another, never forgot they were guests. True, incidents did sometimes occur. For instance, some querulous old man would forget himself and start bickering with a neighbour. And then one after the other, the old men would join in until there was soon such a hubbub in the room that it sounded as if thousands of angry bumble-bees were buzzing around in there. Then, unable to contain himself any longer, the old man would join in and the cunning twinkle in his eyes would turn into an angry flash. Seized with fighting spirit, he would hurl his pipe onto the table and start shouting and shaking his fists in the air.

When everybody started cooling down, he would lit up his pipe and the cunning little twinkle would appear in his eyes again. Sometimes, after a particularly long and drawn-out battle of words, his face would take on a rather guilty look and it was impossible to tell whether he was embarrassed by his friends' behaviour and by letting himself get drawn into their quarrel or felt ashamed at being so weak as to lose control of himself for a moment.

He usually sat solemnly on a high stool in the corner. In general, he preferred sitting slightly higher, probably to emphasise his seniority in age, and so that his friends did not forget who was presiding over their gathering.

However, perhaps the corner was simply his favourite spot, as every head of the household always has one. Besides, when you are leaning your back against a wall, for some reason or other you always feel surer of yourself.

At the start of their tea party the old men used to discuss the bad management in our town, then politics and towards the end always struck up a conversation about professions. Their old host always had the final word here. After listening with an ironic smile to a couple of old men's viewpoints, he would raise his hand and as soon as they had all hushed, would start talking about his work as a plumber.

"Plumbers are a rare breed," he would begin. "They know everything about everybody. The life of every household is spread before their eyes and they can even see what someone's had for dinner..." Then he started generalising: "...And it's this experience of life that enables us to judge all events in a sensible light."

Then he would make a pause, which seemed to him more meaningful than any words. It gave his guests a chance to ponder over what he had just said and him a chance to re-stuff his pipe. After lighting up, he would deliver a short talk on the history of plumbing and then, by way of comparing notes, show how matters stood at present, at once, of course, drawing a conclusion in favour of his former colleagues. If he did not see a look of total agreement on his listeners' faces, he would start criticising present-day plumbers even more virulently, calling them slackers and drunkards. To avoid a row, the old men would start mumbling "yes" and nodding consent. Then the old host would calm down and gently chide the older members of the plumbing profession as well. And completely calming down again, he would warmly praise his peers and speak of the dead with great respect. Many poked fun at these old men but my uncle simply laughed and said, "If we're ever like them, let people laugh at us, too."

Just before one of his tea parties, the old man once asked me to run to the shop for some biscuits. I agreed although I did not like him because, you see, we were

taught to respect our elders. On my return I found all the old men had already arrived and were just settling down at the table. I came flying in and they all beamed and, vying with each other, started tittle-tattling about me.

I should mention that everybody in our street knew about my treasure-hunting and that meant, first and foremost, the old folk, for they were the most inquisitive.

No sooner had I walked in than I was showered with advice to suit all occasions of life and given so many moral instructions at once that if I had listened to them all I would have become a paragon of virtue. The last to speak was the old host but without a cunning twinkle in his eyes.

"Money, money!" he smirked, poking his pipe right under my nose. "Take me for example: I hadn't got anything in the world except friends." He pointed to the grey-haired old men with a sweeping movement of his arm. "But I've got plenty of them. And what about my apprentices who're now working all over town?! Besides teachers everybody ought to have pupils too..." He inhaled and vanished in clouds of smoke and then, appearing again, said, "Know where I grew up? Central Asia! Where there's not a drop of water. And I became a plumber because I've loved water ever since I was a child. There's something magic about it."

He inhaled again and the old men nodded. Flapping away the smoke with one hand, he continued, "My, how many pipes I've laid in my time and God only knows how many people I've given water to. And that's where my wealth lies... And you know the fountain in the park? I made that, too. The kiddies can swim and pick up coins in it to their hearts' content. And grown-ups enjoy its beauty and coolness, too... That's a precious treasure of mine, too. So there you are... But what about yours?! Yours'll never make you happy. You'll see and then you'll remember us old men. No amount of money will ever make you happy if you live only for yourself ... and don't have work you enjoy or people you love. Yes, money, can't buy you love..."

The old man put his pipe out, poured the ashes into a small jar, bowed and went outside.

It was hard to tell what this bow meant and who it was meant for, and whether it was a lesson for me as a member of the brainless generation or for his friends as part of the opening ceremony of their tea party. He always left graciously but this time did so too early—probably by mistake. But this was excusable because he was too distraught.

On the Roof Tops

Bob and I used to climb up the birch in front of our house and swing on its branches. Sometimes we tried to guess who lived under one or other of the roofs or what one or other of our acquaintances was doing at that moment.

In the mornings the roofs were dewy white and cats used to steal across them, sparrow-hunting. During the day the roofs grew so hot that steam rose from them. Technical college students used to sunbathe and swot for their examinations on the various mattresses and camp beds spread out on them. In the evenings the roofs cooled down and long shadows stretched from the chimneys to the eaves. At dusk Bob and I used to be called home so we never saw the roofs at night but knew that as soon as the stars came out, good, bad, sweet and ill-boding "dreams" would appear on the roofs. We imagined them as rather like sleep-walkers, drifting along in white clothes as they slept. We were sure they wandered across the roof-tops all night long and some even crept inside attics and rooms, only we had no idea where they came from. I believed they flew here on umbrellas from far-off lands while Bob claimed they ran over from the woods and shinned up the drainpipes and onto the roofs. He even said he had once seen some workmen taking down a "dream" which had got stuck to a pipe.

Bob's house had a huge attic with piles of slag in it. The sun hardly filtered through its semi-circular latticed windows, and it was always dark and gloomy. Black shadows constantly swayed over its slanting roof like drying linen. The inmates of Bob's house used to drag all their unwanted things up into the attic and it was crammed full of all sorts of rubbish such as broken furniture, a rusty bicycle, a guitar with broken strings, a table lamp, old school text-books, exercise-books full of sums, somebody's diary with some poetry, and plenty of other things besides. And they all now belonged to a large, quiet cat which had lived in the attic for a long time but nobody knew where she came from. All the inmates were extremely fond of her and many used to leave basins of food for her outside the door and call out: "Here, dear little Martha!"

Martha lived a life of luxury. She was pompous, sedate and so lazy that the mice in the attic used to scarper about right under her nose without her ever dreaming of catching them. Only as a form of exercise would she sometimes trot a few yeards, growling, and then quickly come back and flop down to sleep with a yawn. She only dozed by the pipe where it was warm. Her carefree life might have gone on like this forever but suddenly one day Bob and I noticed she had lost weight overnight and then heard a lot of plaintive mewing in different keys coming from the attic. Crawling inside, we saw eight tiny kittens by the pipe.

For a while everything went on the same as usual but as soon as the kittens grew slightly larger and started running across the landing, bedlam broke out in the house. The first to kick up a fuss were the women who began shouting about how the cats were soiling the whole staircase. Then the men began grumbling. Martha and her kittens were in for trouble, so Bob and I crawled into the attic and carried them all to a cosy nook under the pavilion in the park. Then we went round to our friends' flats, offering them all a kitten or a cat. Within a couple of days we had found homes for all the offspring but nobody wanted to take their mother. We spent the whole summer

looking for a home for her but without success.

One day Bob's mother sent him off to buy some grain and I went along to keep him company and as we were standing in the queue, we suddenly heard the shopkeeper say to someone, "We've got mice. If only we had a cat!"

Without a moment's hesitation we dashed over to the pavilion, grabbed Martha, hurried back to the shop and said, "Here's a cat for you!"

"What good boys you are!" exclaimed the shopkeeper in delight. "She doesn't look bad. What's her name?"

"Martha!"

"Well, come here, little Martha," called the shopkeeper, pursing his lips, and then took her and put her down under the counter.

"Don't you worry about Martha!" he said to us. "She'll be in good hands here."

A week later Bob and I called by the shop to see how Martha was getting on. The same man was serving behind the counter but as he did not recognise us, we called quietly to Martha and a round cat's face at once appeared from behind the counter. She blinked, mewed joyfully and came out towards us. She was huge and well-fed and her coat was clean and shiny. We hardly recognised the old Martha in her but she recognised us immediately and came padding up, and began purring and rubbing against our knees and playfully nipping our hands as if to say, "Why've you forgotten about me? You never ever come and see me." She accompanied us to the end of the street and then waddled hurriedly back.

As soon as Martha left, a new inmate appeared in the attic: Bob's seventeen-year-old brother Igor, who worked at the compressor factory and was trying to be totally self-reliant. Bob's family had quite a pleasant apartment but one day Igor announced that he felt stiffled in their poky little rooms and was going to move into the attic.

He made himself quite comfortable by moving all the junk under the windows into a corner, installing an iron bed, a table, a chair, books and setting mouse-traps all

around. And whenever Bob and I crawled into the attic, he always had a cigarette in his mouth.

We at first envied Igor but then one rainy day called by and saw that the roof was riddled with holes and spurts of water were splashing all over his floor and Igor was sitting in a huddle on his bed under an umbrella with gurgling and tinkling buckets, jars, pots and pans all around him. What's more, the vessels were exactly the same size as the holes above.

After that we began to think that Igor had given up normal living conditions simply so as to live higher up than everybody else.

One evening after getting our parents' permission to stay out later than usual, we waited for darkness to fall, and then climbed up the birch to watch out for "dreams". Perched comfortably on the branches, we watched the cool dark night descending. The sky was covered with rain-clouds and only in a few gaps between were stars shining as if from bottomless wells. Bob stared at the roof to the right of his house and I looked at the one to the left but no matter how hard we stared, we could not spot a single "dream". We were already growing stiff with cold in the tree but there was still no sign of them.

"Let's climb down!" I said, turning to Bob, but suddenly noticed he was staring at his house. I followed his stare and everything inside me froze: moving carefully along the very top of the roof were two "dreams", their arms stretched out, and holding onto each other's elbow. By a chimney pot the slightly taller "dream" stretched out his hand to the smaller one and helped him climb down to the drain pipe along the edge of the roof. Then they sat down and started gazing up at the stars. Totally at a loss, Bob and I sat dumbstruck in the tree and then suddenly the moon slipped out from behind the clouds and lit up the "dreams", and we recognised Bob's brother and ... a girl.

Benji, Prince and Co.

At one time everyone in our house had a dog: after the spinster, the Kirillins acquired a dog called Archibald which they started feeding on sausage meat that made my mouth water. Then Boris brought home a bedraggled dog and called him Dodo. After that, on meeting one another neighbours would not inquire after each other's health but would say, "My, your dog looks well!"

I kept asking father to buy a dog but he always said, "Keeping a dog in a town is just cruel. Mother and I go out to work and you go to school and so the dog'll be alone in our room all day long and won't even be able to go out for a walk. Now, if we lived in the country..."

But then I would at once retort, "But when we come home in the evenings, we'll take her for a walk straight-away. And mother says you need to go for walks as you're so pale."

"That may be so," objected father. "But we'll wait for the time being."

I used to go round to our neighbours and ask to walk their dogs. And I used to take them all out.

When I was very small, I did a lot of drawings of dogs, and then cut them out with scissors, attached a string leash to them and walked round the room, talking to them. I also used to sleep with paper dogs in my arms. All in all, I spent my whole childhood among dogs.

* * *

Grand-dad and granny had a huge lumbering Newfoundland called Benji with long floppy ears, bags under his eyes and a deep husky bark.

"Is it true Newfoundlands can swim under water?"

"Yes," drawled grand-dad.

"Probably, all dogs can," I continued. "Only they don't want to. Why get your ears wet for nothing!"

"No, not all can," replied grand-dad. "They can dive but can't swim under water. Benji's special. His ears are made in such a way that they don't let water in. In the old days dogs like him used to be kept at rescue stations and helped save drowning people. When we go to the river, you'll see how Benji chases fishes under the water. And he doesn't swim above it like other dogs either. He spins his tail like a propeller and races along like a little motor boat. And only churns up water behind him... And he's ever so head-strong! Before you can shout at him, he's off downstream in a flash. So you've got to keep an eye on him. And heaven only knows where he's dashing to like a mad thing! After all, he lives in clover here with me. See, he's as handsome as prince. A real glutton, he is!"

Grand-dad patted Benji and he began stamping his paws, wagging his tail and biting grand-dad's boots.

"Stop that!" cried grand-dad. "You've slobbered all over my boot."

Benji walked away sadly, lay down with a sigh, stretched his paws out and laid his head between them.

I scratched him behind his ears and he sprawled out on the floor and rolled his eyes so that you could see his whites.

Benji loved sleeping. He would stretch out on granny's sofa and start snoring. Sometimes he smiled and wagged his tail in his sleep and at others sighed, groaned, shuddered, and his teeth chattered as though he was chasing someone or chewing a marrow bone. Yes, he had real doggy dreams.

...In the day-time Benji would walk around the yards, or, for want of anything better to do, call on his brother, Treasure, in a nearby street. One day out walking he was caught by some people rounding up strays. I ran over to rescue him and showed the people his licence but they replied that he had no right to be running loose without a collar.

Seeing I was about to burst into tears, they then said,

"All right, take him but watch out, if we see him without a collar again, we'll take him in." I opened the cage and Benji rushed at me and began licking my face as if to say: "My, have I had a rough time, friend! I was dead scared, I was!"

Grand-dad taught Benji to pull a small sledge. In winter he would buy firewood, harness Benji up and he would pull the logs on the sledge all the way home. My friends and I often put a tatty old sheepskin in the sledge and Benji pulled us along the street so fast that the runners whined and spirals of snow shot up behind the sledge, and we bumped along with our legs tucked up in the sheepskin's soft folds. But after giving us a couple of rides, he would lie down in the snow and hang his tongue out to show he was tired. But as soon as we unharnessed him, he would start tearing about after the other dogs like a mad thing, and even forgetting his food, run over to his brother and fight with him until evening without ever tiring.

Benji did not like playing with us at all. He had done as a puppy but when he grew up, he preferred adults. If a little boy called to him, he pretended not to hear or came up reluctantly with a sleepy look in his eyes and kept sighing. He still obeyed older children but completely ignored toddlers.

Sometimes fights broke out in our street. Some little boy or other would start being rude to me or even threaten to do all sorts of things to me. Instead of putting up my fists at such moments, I would go over to grand-dad's, put Benji on his lead and walk up and down our street a couple of times and, of course, my enemy would pipe down at once. Quite often I did this just to make sure nobody was getting too big for his boots.

Grand-dad slept badly at night. He would put the samovar on, have a cup of tea and chat to Benji about this and that, and Benji always listened to him with his head cocked on one side, catching every word. Sometimes the bumps on his forehead would draw together and he would sigh. Then grand-dad would stroke him and say,

"That's it, you shaggy dog, I know you understand everything."

But if Benji snorted or growled, grand-dad would say angrily, "What? You don't believe me? You're even going to argue with me?" and reach over and toss a sugar-lump to Benji and then go on with his story.

And he went on mumbling like this until granny took the dog off to her sofa and warmed her feet against his coat for she used to say it helped her rheumatism.

Several times a year granny would comb Benji and knit me mittens and socks with his fur.

My uncle had two dogs: Snowy, a gunner spaniel and Prince, an Alsatian. Uncle never actually went hunting (although he was always meaning to) and Snowy grew bored stiff and pined for something to do. He longed for the countryside but had to make do with the yard.

He was greatly affected by the weather. On dreary grey days he became so miserable that he crawled under the porch and whined plaintively. To make up for it, on sunny days he became as lively as a cricket and chased pigeons round the yard, stood to point at the slightest sound, tried to kiss everybody and raced madly round with Prince.

Snowy was not afraid of dogs, cats or horses but as soon as he caught sight of the bear skin at grand-dad's and granny's, he would dive under the sofa and you could never drag him out again!

As a puppy, Snowy had loved listening to the radio, especially to programmes about animals: he could sit for hours by the loudspeaker listening to birds' songs and wild animals' sounds. When he was getting old, uncle at last made up his mind to go hunting but then could not tear him away from the radio.

Once, however, I did manage to take him into the woods: I intended to shoot magpies with my bow and arrow but he did not scent a single bird and, what's more, led me so deep into the woods that I nearly did not find my way home.

Snowy lived indoors while Prince lived in a large barrel outside, which uncle had turned on its side, filled

with straw and made into a splendid kennel, that was the envy of all the other dogs around. There was nothing for Prince to guard as uncle did not have poultry or a vegetable plot and so he warmed himself in the sun all day. Every now and then he would chase flies or scratch himself behind his ears and yawn, showing his snow-white teeth.

At three he had an amazing sense of smell. One day uncle went off to another town and Prince came running up to him with a broken chain. How he found his way there is anyone's guess. From doing nothing, however, he grew lazy and very stupid and completely lost his sense of smell. Towards the end of his life all he did was chase after his tail and bark whenever he felt like it, and beg for sweets which he was terribly fond of. When uncle played on his guitar, Prince would howl and Snowy would often drawl in a pleasant baritone. They sometimes got so carried away that they went on singing after uncle had put his guitar away, and you only had to shout "bravo!" and they would start all over again, even more loudly than before.

At one time we also had a dog: a stray collie came running into the corridor one day and lay down on our rug and when I tried to drive her out, she refused to budge.

We called her Foxie because her coat was bright red like a fox's. She was ever so obedient and affectionate and lived with us for a whole month but just as we were getting used to her, her owner showed up. I really missed her and mother said we would buy another dog but I thought that no dog could ever take her place.

However, the best and most intelligent dog I knew was Bushy, who lived at my aunt's in the country. Bushy was an ordinary small, black mongrel with a corkscrew tail and a pointed face. She enjoyed hanging about the kitchen, watching my aunt cutting up vegetables on a wooden board and tossing the peels into the rubbish bin. She once ate a cabbage-stump and liked it so much that she went on and tried a beetroot and then a carrot and found them equally tasty. Then she noticed the vegetable plot was full of other delicious things and started digging up

vegetables. In the evening my aunt would decide to pick some tomatoes, which were almost ripe, only to discover the next morning that Bushy had beaten her to it. Later on she took a liking to berries and started guzzling raspberries and black currants on the bushes. Mind you, she never ate gooseberries because they were prickly.

Besides being really fond of tasty food, she was also a guard, nanny and supervisor. She guarded my aunt's garden from little boys' night-time raids and sat by the cradle of a neighbour's little boy during the day; if the child was asleep, she would sit quietly nearby but as soon as he started stirring, she would bark and rock the cradle with her paw. When the baby awoke and was taken off to be fed, Bushy would dart over to the poultry yard and lie down in the shade of the shed's awning and pretend to doze although she was really keeping an eye on everything. If she spotted the geese straying, she would jump up and bark very loudly. And if a goat started stripping an apple tree, she might very well nip it. She never let anyone out of her sight and did not even let the piglet rub itself against the fence's railings just in case it jolly well knocked them down!

All the villagers were fond of Bushy and many tried to borrow her for a couple of days to guard their garden or tend their livestock. Aware of her sweet-tooth, they used to lure her with all sorts of tasty tidbits such as strawberries and cherries. Bushy would glance at them, swallow her saliva but refuse to follow because she was devoted to my aunt.

One day we received a letter from my aunt telling us that Bushy had given birth to five puppies but then, would you believe it, something terrible had happened: a week later Bushy had been knocked down by a car. Neighbours had taken three of the puppies and she had kept one for herself and was offering us the other.

The following Sunday father and I went to her village and came back with Bushy's son.

The puppy had a wet nose, soft little pads on his paws and a smoky grey coat and so we at once named

him, Smoky. He was still tiny and toy-like and smelt of milk.

The first day he would not eat anything. We poured milk into a saucer and then into a bottle with a teat but he simply refused to drink it and that was that! He kept whining and shivering and curling his paws up which were constantly sliding across the floor. I was already beginning to worry he would starve to death when I suddenly remembered Martha and her kittens in Bob's attic.

I tucked the puppy inside my shirt, crawled into the attic and put him down close to Martha who, as it happened, was lying by the pipe with her kittens. And as soon as I squeezed him in between them, he pressed himself against the cat's belly and started sucking noisily. Martha did not seem to mind: she simply raised herself slightly, stared at the puppy and lay down again.

Within a few days Martha had got used to her adopted son and even licked him just like her kittens. The puppy also felt at home in the cat's family and ate, slept and played with Martha's tail with them. True, his favourite toy was a dirty old bone: he was cutting his teeth and chewed it all the time.

All went well until the tiny little kittens turned into small cats and Martha started bringing them sparrows and mice. The kittens would mew with delight but when she put her prey down in front of the puppy, he turned away and when she moved it towards him with her paw, he backed away. To make up for it, he wolfed down the porridge I used to bring him.

One day Martha and her family went down into the yard: Martha in front followed by the puppy, who was the same size, and then by several bouncy, fluffy balls. In the yard the kittens and the puppy started chasing one another and playing hide-and-seek. Then the kittens began climbing a tree and the puppy had a go, too, but kept crashing down, squealing and jumping up the trunk again. I at once realised it was time to take him away from the cats but it turned out to be not that simple. Martha refused point-blank to give him up and when I reached

for him, started hissing and sticking her claws out.

I decided to turn Smoky into a gun dog but first I had to get him used to shots. I poured milk into a saucer and as soon as he started lapping, held a piston revolver close to his ear and fired. He was scared to start off with but then got used to it.

On hot days Smoky and I would run down to the river for a swim. Smoky loved splashing about in the shallow water but I only had to drag him in slightly deeper and he would paddle wildly towards the bank or, worse still, start climbing onto my back. Once I dived down and surfaced quite a long way off and saw Smoky spinning round and round in the same spot and glancing anxiously round. Then a little way off he spotted a blue cap just like mine, raced towards it and started climbing onto the swimmer's back but, you see, it turned out to be a girl! And she swept round and didn't half scream! I don't blame her! How would you like a scruffy wet monster climbing on top of you?! But Smoky was even more scared and dived down so that only his ears were left above the surface, and tore towards the bank.

On Sundays all my family used to gather at my grandparents' house and uncle and I used to go along with our dogs. Granny would start up the samovar, get out her pies and curd cakes and we would sit down at the table with the dogs beside us, staring at our mouths and longing to sample the tasty food, too. I would give them a pie each and granny would shout, "Come on, out you go, you cadgers! As for you, Benji, aren't you ashamed of yourself? After all, you've just eaten a whole bowl of spuds!"

And Benji would go out with his tail between his legs, with Snowy, Prince and my Smoky behind.

Then out in the yard they would start fighting one another for fun: Benji would take on the other three or they would attack him. Playful Prince and Smoky would pounce at Benji, jumping about in front of his nose, barking and trying to grab his paw while Snowy hovered in the background with a cunning look on his face and then came forwards and lunged at the scruff of Benji's

neck. Then Prince and Smoky would at once leap at Benji and he would start panting heavily like a giant, turn slightly and the others would fly head over heels in all directions. I sometimes took part in these boisterous games and the four of us would then get the better of Benji.

This is how I grew up among dogs and got to know their habits and even learnt how to imitate their voices. I would call by on uncle and start barking huskily round the corner and Snowy and Prince would bark back in bewilderment, thinking that Benji had decided to give them a fright. Or I'd run over to my grand-dad's, hide behind the door and bark shrilly and hoarsely just like Prince, and Benji would jump up and start growling angrily.

The dogs gradually came to accept me as one of them—even dogs from other streets I did not know. Catching sight of me, they would snarl and their hackles would rise but I would stare straight into their eyes and bark something like: "Come off it, I know all your little tricks! Don't you recognise one of your own kind?!" And the dog would calm down at once, bound up, weaving his body, and press his head against my leg and say apologetically: "Now, don't get angry. I took you for someone else. All sorts of folks pass this way. I thought you were one of them, you see, but it seems you're one of us. My, you're covered in bumps and bruises. And you even smell of dogs..."

At that time I could go up to any large dog and be sure he'd never bite me...

...Benji died of old age. He guarded the house, kept watch over the poultry yard and pulled the logs on a sledge to the very end. When uncle left town, Snowy was taken on by the Zoo as a guard-dog. By then he had become very odd indeed. His kennel stood next to the aviary and he would rush at the little birds' cages. There was a huge parrot sitting in the next cage but for some reason or other he never seemed to notice it. Word has it that Snowy once broke free of his chain and rushed at the polecat's cage and the latter died of a heart attack.

Daft old Prince was taken in by uncle's neighbours who said that he had a very beautiful coat.

And Smoky became my best friend. After he came to live with us, our neighbours stopped asking me how I was and always exclaimed, "My, what a lovely dog you've got!"

In Autumn

In September there was a smell of burning in our street. Beet tops and fallen leaves were being burned in the gardens and we used to build shelters out of sunflower stalks. We would gather up some swedes, carrots and cabbages, crawl into our shelter, sit down and munch the vegetables, inhale the sweet smell of dry leaves and watch the clouds scudding south and the swallows skimming over the ground like black streaks of lightning.

Every Saturday after school we usually went fishing on the river behind the cemetery. Sometimes, however, we would go over to the lakes. We would go part of the way on a suburban train and then walk the remaining two kilometres through the woods. Fishing on the lakes was fantastic—in just one evening we would each catch a whole netful of perch. We usually went in a threesome: Bob, me and Valeri, our classmate who was being taught music by an old lady. However, one Saturday after lessons Valeri said to us, "Perhaps we'll give it a miss this time?"

"Why?" I asked in surprise.

"The weather's superb. Just right for fishing!" added Bob.

"I just don't like it," drawled Valeri. "And I'm behind with solfeggio."

"You can work at it afterwards," I suggested.

"Oh, why don't you just give up music?" advised Bob.

"I can't. Let's go next Saturday, all right?"

"Well," I sighed. "All right, we'll give it a miss this time. But next Saturday's on or else!"

In the middle of the week Bob came running up out of breath and said, "Quick! Come and have a look at old Valeri! It's such a joke!"

We went into Valeri's house and said hello to his mother, Auntie Sofia.

"Ssh," she said, pressing her finger to her lips. "Valeri's studying. Come back a bit later."

"It's urgent!"

"Oh, all right! Only just for a couple of minutes and no more," she replied, pointing to the next room. "And try to walk on tiptoe."

Valeri was seated at the piano, looking flushed and highly confused, and standing next to him was a girl with fair hair, green eyes and small sharp teeth, shouting right in his ear, "F!.. F!.. F-flat!"

Catching sight of us, the girl stopped shouting and frowned.

"Hello!" Valeri mumbled and flushed even more.

"Are you getting ready for Saturday?" asked Bob.

"No, not yet," replied Valeri, shaking his head.

"Which Saturday?" asked the girl sternly.

"We're going fishing," I explained.

"Oh no you're not! Valeri's got to st..."

"We didn't ask you," Bob butted in. "Val, we're going, aren't we?"

Valeri nodded indecisively.

"Go away!" said the girl. "Stop getting in our way or I'll tell Auntie Sofia."

"Go on, tell her!" Bob snapped, shaking his fist at her.

The following Saturday Bob and I went over to Valeri's house straight after school. On the porch Bob nudged me and pointed to the window with a sarcastic grin. Inside we could see Valeri and his fair-haired teacher playing a piece for four hands.

"Valeri!" we shouted.

Valeri ran up to the window, looking embarrassed, dishevelled and sweaty.

"Ready?" we called to him.

"What for?" he asked.

"What do you mean?!" I asked indignantly. "We're off fishing in an hour."

"Oh!" replied Valeri, suddenly remembering, and scratching the back of his head, stammered, "I'll join you a bit later... Go on ahead... We'll meet by the pump house."

"Go on ahead?! What do you mean by 'a bit later'?" asked Bob, waving his arms about. "We've decided to stay overnight and fish in the morning as well."

"Fine," Valeri muttered. "We'll stay overnight, if you say so. Only I'll join you a bit later. Let's meet by the pump house."

"Oh well, all right," I said, and giving him a threatening look, added, "Only make sure you show up!"

"I will!" Valeri nodded and started to back away.

"But maybe you won't?" asked Bob suspiciously. "Better tell us now."

"No, I'll definitely come!" Valeri repeated.

"Then take a pan with you," added Bob. "Or else we won't have anything to cook in!"

Valeri nodded.

The pump house was near Lake Glubokoye. Lying close by, half-buried in sand, was an old long-boat whose sheeting was covered with scaly brown rust. The remains of a raft were floating nearby. Before fishing on hot days we used to race along the boat's rotten deck, plunge in and swim under water and then crawl onto the raft and run along its bobbing logs towards the shore.

That day Bob and I arrived early and decided to settle down for the night by Lake Voimezhnoye.

"Let's make a shelter, cast our bait and then go and meet Valeri by the pump house," I said.

"O'kay!" agreed Bob. "Only you'd better meet him alone while I gather some dry wood for a fire."

"All right," I nodded and we set off round Lake Glubokoye.

We went through some shrubs on the other side and came to Lake Karasevo where a half-sunken boat was hidden

among the rushes. After bailing the water out and breaking off a long branch for a paddle, we crossed over to the other side, went down a shallow tributary overgrown with sedge into Lake Voimezhnoye and moored in a gently curved cove among trees growing in the silt, fallen logs and bubbling sandy-bottomed springs. And it seemed, if you threw a sugar lump into them, you'd have a lovely, cool fizzy drink.

In the late afternoon we built a shelter, cast our bait and cut down some forked branches to prop our rods on the next morning. As soon as the sun sank behind the tree tops, Bob went off to find some dry branches and I got into the boat and set off to meet Valeri. After reaching Lake Karasevo, I hid the boat in some riverside bushes, and walked round Lake Glubokoye towards the pump house. By this time the sun had already set but it was still light. The pump giving water to the station village was droning noisily inside the house—a timber structure with a peaked roof. An old mechanic was sitting on a bench out in front, smoking a cigarette. He was dozing and did not notice me come up. And only when I said hello, he came to, flicked his ash and asked, "Well, had a good catch, then?"

"We haven't started yet," I replied. "We're going to fish tomorrow... You see, I've arranged to meet a friend here. You haven't seen him about, have you?"

"Who?"

"Our friend. A boy like me with rods."

"Nope, haven't seen a soul," replied the old man, yawning.

"In that case he should show up any moment now," I said.

"Maybe," agreed the old man, flicking his cigarette again. "You can sit yourself down here and wait."

Darkness fell and the evening's silence was only broken by the droning pump and when it stopped every now and then, you could clearly hear a cuckoo calling and the latest news broadcast coming through a loudspeaker at the station. The old man stood up with a groan, walked round the house and then turned the lamp on over the bench.

Half an hour later the sound of an engine horn came from the direction of the town.

"He's probably on this one," I said to the old man.

"Maybe he is and maybe he isn't," weezed the old man, lighting up another cigarette.

"He's bound to be!" I said firmly. "He promised... And he's got our pan which we need to cook supper in, you see."

The old man coughed but said nothing. At that moment a steam-engine drew into the station and began puffing more slowly and softly. Its couplings creaked and fell silent. I ran up to the path through the forest and watched the track but nobody appeared on it.

"He'll probably be on the next one," I said, walking up to the old man.

"No, he's probably not going to come now," he replied, shaking his head. "It's already getting on. The last train'll be in an hour from now."

"He'll probably be on it," I said quietly and then sat down on the bench and stared at the water.

"Well, just you wait, Valeri dear," I thought. "We won't half beat you up. Fancy being late because of your music... And as for that girl!.." I punched the bench with my clenched fist.

"Easy does it!" chuckled the old man, reading my mind. "Let's go and have a snooze instead."

He opened the door and by the wall inside I caught sight of a large bed covered with a sheepskin. The old man lay down, beckoned to me and wheezed, "Make yourself comfortable beside me."

I shook my head and turned away...

I was awoken by a train's whistle. A train was drawing out of the station and a little chain of lights was flickering at the end of the path. The sound of the engine died away but nobody came out onto the path.

"What's gone wrong?" I said aloud. "What on earth's happened?"

The old man came out, stretching and yawning.

"That's it!" he drawled. "There'll be none now till morning. Go and lie down."

"No, no, I can't," I said and suddenly thought to myself, "He probably missed the train and is hitching a lift."

"Can you see the road from the roof top?" I asked.

"Well, yes, you can but I wouldn't bother climbing up there."

But ignoring his advice, I climbed right to the top of the roof, stood at full height, and looked down at the shining ribbon of the road. I stayed up there a long time but only a car, an inter-city bus, and a covered lorry with a trailer passed by without stopping at the station. It was only then I realised Valeri really was not going to turn up.

"Well, you cheat, just you wait!" I muttered and, gritting my teeth in anger, climbed down the roof and went inside.

Bob and I did not go fishing in the morning. We quickly wound in our lines, hurried to the station, and sat in stony silence all the way home, thinking of a way to get our own back on Valeri. The only thing that could save him was if something exceptional had happened like he had broken a leg or his house had caught fire. So, imagine our amazement when, catching sight of us, he asked, "Well, how did the fishing go?"

We did not talk to him for a whole week after that. He kept walking along our fences, trying to have a word with us and make things up but we did not even want to hear his name mentioned. Fancy letting your friends down like that because of some old music!

One day a rumour went around the yard: that evening a concert was going to be held at the school and Valeri would be taking part in it.

Bob and I went along just for fun and because all our friends were going too. We had decided to listen to all the other performances and then leave when Valeri's turn came.

When we arrived, however, the school hall was packed

so full of children that we had to stand by a wall. To our surprise, the first to appear on stage was the girl with the fair hair and green eyes who taught Valeri piano. She introduced the concert and then announced that Valeri was going to play something or other. Bob and I tried to leave but the aisle was blocked and so we had to stay put. Valeri walked up to the piano, bowed to the audience and started playing. I turned towards the window and looked at the sun, which had just settled like a bouncy red ball on the eaves of the house opposite and was melting the fence's railings and spewing dazzling sparks onto the ground. Then all of a sudden it partly hid behind the roof and started making faces at me and luring me, as it were, outwide. "Climb up onto the roof towards me," it seemed to say, "and we'll send out sunbeams, fire arrows, dazzle passers-by and fill dark corners with light..."

Then it almost completely disappeared behind the roof, leaving a sheaf of rays in the sky, which flared up at the end of the roof, and stretched right across the sky to the horizon, shuddering and dissolving like golden strings and emitting sounds like water babbling through a wooden gutter. These sounds filled all the space around and I suddenly felt as light as a feather. Pushing off from my chair, I landed on the window-sill, and swinging the window open, flew over the ground...

From up above I could see our street, our house and Bob's and Valeri's too. "What a pity," it flashed through my mind, "nobody can see me flying. How envious Bob and Valeri would be... What's fishing compared to this!" For some reason or other I no longer even felt angry at Valeri because all such mundane grudges seemed trifling to me now... I flew back into the school only after the sun had completely vanished and even its glow had disappeared from the sky. As soon as I landed back on my chair, loud applause broke out around and for a moment I thought it was me they were applauding and I was about to stand up and bow when I suddenly

felt someone nudge me in the ribs. I turned round and saw Bob.

"My, isn't he good! He's a real pianist!" he said, nudging me again.

Only then did it dawn on me that the sounds I had heard were none other than Valeri's music. It had bewitched me so much that I felt I was flying. Valeri had finished playing long ago but the audience went on applauding him and I still could not come to my senses. It appeared that there was something essential and much more important to life than our fishing trips.

Village Life

I once lived with my Aunt Gruna in the country. I was twelve at the time—precisely the age when every little boy first becomes conceited and cocksure and then experiences a rather vague feeling similar to love. I was no exception although in my case it all happened in reverse, and the feeling I experienced was by no means vague.

In the village there was a thin fair-haired little girl with a wandering pensive smile and huge, dark, velvety eyes. Her real name was Julia but everyone called her "Fruitie" because she wore orange and lemon dresses. Julia was so beautiful I was afraid to look at her. As soon as I caught sight of her, I would immediately look away. I only had to catch her eye and I went completely weak at the knees and my head started spinning round. And if Julia then spoke to me, I could not hear her and only saw her lips moving. And when she touched my hand one day, I at once turned to ice.

I was both afraid of Julia and attracted to her because she was beautiful and looked at me in a rather mysterious way and was always changing her dresses and so always seemed slightly unfamiliar. I only felt slightly relieved when I discovered she was no good at football. And as I tended to judge her by what my other friends said about her, I,

of course, at once added other of her virtues to the list of her shortcomings such as, for instance, her thinness and graceful feminine movements, love of music and flowers, and even her smile. I realised my mistake only a year later and again felt attracted to her but by that time had become slightly maturer and more self-confident.

Apart from being beautiful, Julia had one other important virtue: she was good at listening to others, which was precisely what I appreciated in girls most because I myself was very talkative. At that time I was always in a hurry to assert myself. That's why I used to tell every new acquaintance all I knew and, what's more, put on airs to make myself sound more convincing. With friends who had heard my stories more than once, I usually invented things so as to keep the centre of interest.

I used to tell Julia all about bicycles and their complex structure and the difficulties involved in steering them and keeping your balance, and the numerous dangers the cyclist encountered at every turn of the pedals. And Julia always listened attentively to me, leaning her head against a branch and smiling. Sometimes I told her about some dreadful episode in my life when I was within a hair's breadth of death. Then Julia's smile would vanish from her face and her eyelashes would start batting so fast I could feel a breeze. In order to confirm my success and cheer Julia up, I would say casually towards the end, "But generally speaking, cycling isn't hard. The main thing is not to be afraid of getting bruises."

I should mention that at that time I really did cycle quite well. Come to think of it, it was perhaps the only thing I did do well. I had mastered the art of riding my bicycle to perfection. I could even do various tricks as I rode along but what I most enjoyed was simply pedalling jauntily along without holding onto the handlebars.

"Do you know who's the best cyclist round here?" I once asked Julia.

I thought she would spend a long time guessing but she at once replied, "Yes, you!"

I really cheered up after that.

As I was telling her about bicycles, I did not notice that she was adopting some of my catch phrases and even copying my gestures. I found this particularly attractive. Quite naturally somehow, I started following her as if tied to her. Then one day my friend, Nicky, who was also a cyclist, said, "She's twisting you round her little finger and leading you up the garden path but you keep following her like a shadow."

Another would have taken offence but I didn't because I knew Nicky was simply jealous. I could see and feel that he liked Julia, too, and was secretly jealous of me. For some reason or other he hardly ever rode up to me when I was alone but as soon as he spotted Julia with me, he would race up in a flash and call out, "Hi! How're things?" and then start chatting about bicycles and about what a wonderful chain-drive he had or how he had just ridden down the school steps.

"Oh, why don't you keep quiet!" I would interrupt him. "What do you know about chain-drives? Down steps, my foot! You're just a twit, you are."

I had nothing to prove Nicky liked Julia but just suspected it instinctively. However, after comparing myself to him, I quickly decided he could not match me. He spoke rather hesitantly and quietly even about bicycles, thus giving the impression that he did not really know what he was talking about. I, you see, always spoke very loudly and thought that Julia must realise I was a crack cyclist. At that time I was sure that it was what a woman heard that caused her to fall in love.

Julia and I had many happy times together but I forgot all about them. For some odd reason we take everything good for granted, and when life's happy, time flies by unnoticed. Thus, you can probably make the following conclusion: if you haven't noticed how your life's passed, it means, you haven't had a bad time. However, I do still remember one day. I once offered Julia a ride on my bicycle. She nodded eagerly but when she tried to climb onto the crossbar, she found she couldn't, and so asked me to help.

I expressly gave a deep sigh and helped her on. This

was my first display of gallantry and although nobody saw me, I still felt embarrassed.

I ran along beside Julia, jumped onto the saddle and raced out of the village.

It was a hot sunny day. The low-lying land along the way shimmered like pools of water. Before my eyes Julia's hair fluttered like flags and her delicate pink ear was as translucent as a petal. We streaked along like lightning. The flowers along the roadside merged in a brightly-coloured haze. Julia held tightly on to the handle-bars, and kept opening and closing her mouth and gulping down the oncoming wind. She squealed with delight and pleaded, "Careful! We're going to crash!"

"Nonsense, you coward!" I replied, pedalling even faster.

I still remember this happy occasion. Only it's a pity Julia's presentiment came true and we ended up by crashing into a ditch.

I probably got carried away looking at Julia's ear and did not go round a stone. Julia was lucky: she flew over the handle-bars and flopped into a hazel bush whereas I was less lucky and crashed straight into a tree. A handle stabbed me so painfully in the stomach that I could not open my eyes or stir for a long time. Julia came running up, squatted on her heels and started fussing about and calling to me in a shaky voice. Then Nicky came racing up and started to give me the kiss of life.

"He's out cold! But he'll probably pull through," he diagnosed.

Hearing this, Julia burst out crying and her tears were for me the best evidence of her warm feelings.

Everything good and bad has another side to it. This incident not only convinced me of Julia's love but also marked the beginning of my off-hand attitude to her.

From then on we cycled together almost every day but never again with the same feeling of novelty and

ease. What's more, the more confiding Julia became, the more callous I was. I started turning up late to our meetings, and lying to her. She probably sensed I was deceiving her but still made herself believe me. You see, it's easy to believe someone when you want to. And it was only when I went completely to the other extreme and started being rude to her that her self-esteem got the better of her and she stopped meeting me. I was too stupid to understand the change in her and could not guess that all love—even the strongest—has to be nurtured and supported all the time and, of course, not destroyed.

However, I was not very upset about losing her. Firstly, because I was a terrible egoist and, secondly, because I had fallen in love with someone else.

While Julia and I were going for cycle rides, a little girl with artful slanting eyes and freckles, which I thought had been painted on, used to often run up to us. She always wore a necklace of ashberries strung on a thread and had a strange name—Severina.

As Julia and I rode through the village, Severina often stood with her legs crossed and watched us with an ironic smile and sometimes shouted out some caustic remark like, "My, you're hopeless!" or "What a couple—just like a goose and gander!"

I took no notice as I did not consider there was anything special about Severina but one day as I was drawing up to my aunt's house, Severina came up and asked, "Is Julia the only one you take for rides?"

I jumped off my bicycle and pondered over what she had said for several seconds, suspecting she was being sarcastic but finding nothing of the sort, said calmly, "I can take anyone you like."

"Will you take me, then?" she asked, screwing up her eyes and looking at me rather strangely.

I wheeled my bicycle up to her and she jumped agilely onto the crossbar. I noticed the bicycle went along much more easily with Severina than it did with Julia and was much simpler to steer. She was quite relaxed, and hardly held on to the handle-bars, and kept turning round,

smiling and yelling, "Faster, faster!" and waving her feet in the air as if turning invisible pedals.

I strained myself as hard as I could and we raced along so fast that the wind filled out Severina's dress and ripped my shirt up but Severina only laughed and, unlike Julia, wasn't in the least scared. It was then I realised that Severina was in no way worse than Julia and in some ways, even better.

After riding about a kilometre out of the village, we turned round and raced back to Severina's house and stood there for several minutes in silence to get our breath back. She was standing so close I could feel her breathing and smell her tanned skin and see the light peachy down on her cheeks. After getting her breath back, she thanked me quietly and suddenly drew closer and kissed me, and said in a scarcely audible whisper, "See you soon!"

By the time I reached home, I was convinced Severina was far better than Julia and cursed myself for not having noticed this earlier.

This was one of the most wonderful and saddest discoveries of my life. From then on ever-increasing opportunities opened up before me. However, I had still to learn that these opportunities would mostly bring me fleeting joy and then disillusionment. However, once I had set out on this deceptive path, I simply could not rid myself of these illusory notions and my discovery thus marked an irretrievable step in my life.

What was most upsetting was that the next day Severina started making quips at me just as if nothing had happened between us. You see, I had thought that everything would be different after the kiss. I had reckoned on a long serious romance but, blow me down if she did not turn out to be a frivolous girl, or, worse still, an artful actress.

I felt very hurt and even fell ill and my aunt gave me herbal infusions to drink for several days, convinced that I had some mysterious illness. As soon as I was up and about again, I pretended that Severina meant nothing to me. When I met her in the street, I started

whistling loudly and skipped past her. When I was with my friends, I made faces at her and said rude things to her. Looking back, I now think I wasn't good at seeming indifferent to her because I pretended too hard and this probably made everyone see through me.

When I returned home a few days later Severina was waiting for me and again asked for a ride on my bicycle. Unable to get the better of myself, I agreed and we again went for a wonderful ride. Like the first time, after arriving back at home, she quietly thanked me and gave me a kiss. The next day I at once felt better. Then, much to my dismay, Severina went for a ride on Nicky's bicycle and made me suffer again. Everything was so fragile and unstable that my happiness could be shattered or restored at any moment.

One day we sat on some logs by her house in front of a rare selection of pink and white horn-shaped convolvuluses which looked like little coloured parachutes. It was midday and very close. I ran my finger through the air and Severina tried to guess what I was drawing. All of a sudden she said, "Know what?! Let's ride over to the Mesha and have a dip."

The Mesha was a small river about seven kilometres away, with cracked, bumpy silt along its banks and the occasional small sandbank overgrown with burdocks and goosefoot.

After choosing the best sandbank, we threw our bicycle down on the sand and, flushed from the ride, raced towards the water. Throwing my shirt off as I ran, I flew straight into the water while Severina stopped to take her dress off and jumped in after me. I splashed wildly through the water, shouting and squealing with delight and Severina now swam up to me, laughing and spraying me with water, and now quietly swam away with her head high above the surface like a little mermaid.

After swimming until we were covered with goose flesh, we flopped onto the white sand and lay still for a long time, sunbathing in the baking-hot sun and watching beetles crawling inside tiny craters. Severina's hand suddenly crept towards me under the sand and I

started in surprise. She burst out laughing, jumped up and shaking the sand off, ran off to gather snail shells. Meanwhile I decided to build a shelter and started dragging over rose willow branches and sticking their thick ends into the sands and tying reeds over the top. Then I picked some burdocks and threw them over the shelter's frame. After that I walked down to the water's edge where Severina was sitting and drawing in the silt with a twig: "Severina+Alex=love".

Then we sat inside our shelter, climbed trees, ran across the meadow, played tag, made flower chains and finally ran into the wood to pick blackberries. Without noticing it, we wandered into the heart of the wood and lost our way and our happy moods instantly vanished. We even started squabbling and accusing each other of being stupid. However, after straying for a while, we came out of the wood and caught sight of the river among some round rose willow bushes. By this time the sun was already sinking low and shining so dimly you could look at it. And the trees, rose willow bushes, flowers in the meadow and the river were so beautiful and still that it seemed someone had swathed them in red silk. The silence even made our ears buzz.

When we came up to the river, some frogs were plopping about in the water and a school of young fishes, startled by our shadows, flicked away from the bank. We thought we were walking straight towards our base but it turned out to be somewhere else.

"Our base is up there!" I said, confidently pointing upstream and started wading through the shallow water. My companion trudged after me, shivering. She was already tired and dragged her feet along, churning up bubbles and grains of sand on the bottom.

There was no sign of our base upstream either so we climbed onto the bank and walked back downstream through the slippery dewy grass. Turning round, I noticed that Severina's eyelids were blinking fast and her lips quivering. She was obviously on the brink of tears. I knew I had to say something friendly to prevent her from crying but could not think what. Then all of a

sudden I noticed that only a tiny rim of the sun was still hovering above the hills.

"Look, Severina!" I cried and pointed to the fading strip of light.

Severina stopped and we watched the sun sink below the horizon directly ahead. After it had completely vanished, I noticed that Severina was staring more and more intently into the misty distance and even standing on tiptoe.

After a while we reached our sandbank but neither our clothes nor our bicycle were anywhere to be seen. There were boot prints all around and broken branches from our shelter were scattered here and there.

I started rushing about the bushes for I was sure someone had played a joke on us and hidden our things but I searched in vain. Severina sat down on the sand, wrapped her arms round her knees and burst into tears. I stood nearby, not knowing what to do next. Suddenly she jumped up and started running towards the village's distant lights and I ran after her. She gradually slowed down and then started walking. She was no longer crying: she only sobbed and quivered and completely calmed down by the time we reached the village and a sad fixed look appeared on her face.

I felt very upset. For the first time in several days I recalled Julia and how we had fallen off the bicycle and how she had fretted about me and called my name. And I went on thinking about her all the rest of the way.

Five days later my aunt took me home to my parents. We left the village on a cart and then travelled down the Mesha in a motor boat. I sat down in front, the boat-man started the engine and the boat's fore rose and started gliding downstream. As I looked at the numerous sandbanks by the shore, I suddenly caught sight of the one we had lost.

Just as a few days before, our shelter was standing among the burdocks and my bicycle and shirt and Severina's dress were lying nearby. Everything was just as we had left it on that sunny day. Even the words Severina had traced in the silt had not been washed away.

A Downpour in the Woods

I used to think that everyone was constantly deceiving me. What's more, some used to make a fool of me in a crude and obvious manner while others blushed and stammered as they pulled a fast one on me. As far as I could make out, only a couple of people were sincere with me but I was sure they were simply waiting for an opportunity to make a laughing-stock of me. I thought like this because I was very mistrustful and always telling fibs myself.

In our street there was an old woman who used to go mushroom-picking in the woods with a basket. She would leave home late, at about nine in the morning when all the expert mushroom-pickers were long since home and less than three hours later reappear in our street with her basket full of mushrooms, neatly covered with hazel leaves. What's more, she only brought home the very best penny buns, each and every one of which was always clean and smooth.

The woods where everyone went mushroom-picking started on the outskirts of town, three tram stops away from our street. Russulas were almost the only sort which grew there and good rare ones like orange caps, chanterelles and penny buns were snapped up at dawn by the really keen pickers. And after the weekends when the woods were full of people, even the russulas disappeared from the glades. That's why it was a complete mystery how the old woman found these penny buns. At first, I put her full baskets down to sheer good luck but after noticing them regularly, began to suspect something underhand. I started keeping an eye on her and spotted something strange about her. Outwardly, she was just like any other old woman—wrinkled and hunched, with dry knotty hands. And she wore a black dress, a cardigan and an ordinary cotton scarf just like any other, too. However, she walked very differently from other

old women. She did not shuffle her feet or noisily tap a stick but somehow quietly sneaked along.

To start off with, all I noticed was her artless expression and rather stupid smile. On meeting acquaintances in the street, she would smile and bow to them in an ingratiating manner and if they started telling her something, she would listen attentively for a long time with her head on one side, mumbling "yes" and nodding all the time.

Then I noticed that her expression changed in a rather unnatural manner during the conversation. First a look of horror would appear on her face and her eyes would bulge and she would press her palm against her cheek and start shaking her head and sighing. Then she would suddenly go to the other extreme and turn away from the person, waving her hands at him, giggling and opening her toothless mouth.

I became more and more convinced that she was subtly acting the part of a naive and foolish old woman in order to draw all sorts of information out of people. Numerous times I heard a trusting person being taken in by her sham interest, and unburdening his heart to her and telling her all his troubles. And the old woman would listen to everything of interest and then look away furtively and her face would take on a very calm expression which only a totally indifferent person could have. True, she sometimes also talked to them about something—mostly about her children who, she said, lived somewhere outside town but for some reason or other never came to visit her. Every time she mentioned them, she began sobbing and theatrically dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief.

The old woman's unnatural way of behaving and constant play-acting set me against her and led me to think she was up to no good. Apart from anything else, she never looked a person in the eye and this confirmed my suspicions.

As the old woman was once returning home with a full basket as usual at noon, I shoved my hands in my pockets to look sinister and strode towards her with a

knowing ironic grin on my face. Catching sight of me, the old woman paled and immediately crossed over to the other side of the street. This incident finally convinced me that she was avoiding me because she was afraid of being exposed. After that I felt inclined to report her intrigues to the police but decided to bide my time until I had gathered more accurate information which would show up not only the old woman but possibly her accomplices, too.

One Sunday morning I took a basket, supposedly to gather mushrooms in, and started waiting for the old woman. As soon as she came out into the street, I casually sauntered after her, whistling a tune. After walking the whole length of the street, the old woman turned into a lane and set off with light bouncy steps towards the tram stop while I kept at a respectful distance and pretended to be examining the billboards but never let the mysterious mushroom-picker out of my sight.

As soon as the tram came in view, I quickened my pace and jumped onto the tram at the same time as the old woman. As she was tearing off a ticket, she spotted me and immediately walked to the front and stared out the window with an air of concentration all the way. At the terminal stop, she alighted and set off down the road towards the wood. When she was already a fair distance away, I started following her. I was feeling rather tense for I had little idea of what surprises lay ahead of me. However, as soon as I entered the hot grey fir-grove, I made up my mind not to take risks and to regard my first sortie as a reconnaissance mission and if anything went wrong, hide in the bushes at once.

It was a hot, dazzlingly sunny day. The air was silvery with dust. A hot mist was rising from the woodland flowers and clover along the roadsides.

At the end of the fir-grove the old woman turned round and spotting me, straightened her scarf, quickened her step and scurried along the path between the trees. I quickly realised she had decided to fool me by leading me the wrong way. So, to show her I had seen through her cunning ploy, I ran up almost behind her

and started singing loudly to seem more independent and say to her, as it were: "Stop pretending, my dear old lady. The game's up. Out with it!"

Hearing my voice, the old woman walked even faster, and kept adjusting her scarf.

"Feeling edgy, are we, dearie," I thought to myself. "No doubt about it, you're in a bad way now that someone like me's on your trail."

So absorbed was I in the chase that I did not notice leaving the fir-grove far behind and entering a dense pinewood. All of a sudden above me I caught sight of the burning-hot swaying trunks, their creaking scaly barks and swishing crowns. Looking down again, I suddenly noticed that the old woman had vanished. I ran on ahead and started looking down the path but there was not a soul in sight. It flashed through my mind that she was hiding in the bushes somewhere so I started hunting under the green thickets but she wasn't there either.

Half an hour later I was drenched in perspiration from running. I spat angrily and headed home. The old woman had turned out to be more cunning than I had imagined. I had only been off-guard for a second but she had still managed to trick me.

The following Sunday I decided to keep on her trail come what may. In the early morning I took a basket and ostentatiously sat down on her porch. At about nine she came out as usual, straightened her scarf and, catching sight of me, smiled gloatingly, and lisped, "Going to pick some nice little mushrooms, are you, sonny?" and then set off down the road to the tram stop with me in hot pursuit.

It was another very close day and hot steam was rising from the burning asphalt. It was scorching even under the shady trees. Alighting on the outskirts of town, the old woman turned off the road and suddenly walked diagonally across a crop of pale green oats towards the wood. I was not such a fool as not to realise she was doing this to put me off the scent but this time I was on my guard and kept close on her heels. She turned

round and shook her head reproachfully but I did not care any more. I was already sick and tired of her tricks and stubbornly walked on behind her.

As we entered the wood, it suddenly began to thunder. Then the sun was covered by a dark puffy raincloud and heavy pellets of rain started pelting down. The light in the wood turned green and a wind blew up from somewhere behind the foliage to one side.

"You ought to go back, sonny," muttered the old woman without turning round. "There's going to be a storm."

In my heart of hearts I was already thinking the same myself but after she said this with the obvious intention of getting rid of me, I decided to go through thick and thin until I carried my mission through for, you see, my self-esteem and prestige were now at stake.

All of a sudden a blinding streak of lightning flashed over the wood followed by such an ear-splitting thunderclap that pine needles started twirling through the air. Then the noise grew louder and louder and a sheet of rain came crashing down. I expected the old woman to immediately take cover under the trees but she only quickened her pace. I found it very hard keeping up with her because the wet grass had become slippery, and clay and dust kept sticking to my shoes and I started tripping more and more often over the roots lying across the path. Meanwhile the old woman crept on like a cat as though nothing were the matter, and only muttered, "What a lad! What a lad!"

The rain gushed down even more like a stormy waterfall. Everything ahead turned into flashing grey streaks, just as if someone invisible was sketching the trees, bushes and path. I was soaked to my skin, my shoes were squelching and my wet clothes clinging horribly to my body. Fortunately, it stopped raining just as suddenly as it had begun. The rain-clouds dispersed over the wood and everything around was bathed in sunlight. Every now and then raindrops filtered through the leaves, and a mist started rising from the trees and the clouds hovered in the puddles like islands. I trudged straight

through them, smashing the clouds to smithereens.

"Thank heavens, it's over," the old woman mumbled and turned sharply onto another path. I tore after her and ten yards ahead caught sight of a wooden shack enclosed by a slab wall. I felt a stabbing pain inside and my feet stopped moving.

"Come on, come on, sonny," said the old woman, turning round. "You can go mushroom-picking when you've dried out."

"Oh no, you don't," I thought and at once saw a gang of thieves in my mind's eye. I shook my head and stepped off the path. The old woman muttered something and then walked towards the house. After making a small detour, I walked up to the house on the other side, squatted under a bush and started watching.

The house was rather strange. Strands of tow were hanging down from between its beams, its roof was covered with shingles instead of tiles, and a sheet of plywood inscribed with the words "Forester Kuzmin's House" was stuck to the wall above a window.

Even to someone who knew nothing about the old woman, it was obvious this sign was a decoy as there was nothing else this solitary house in the wood could be. However, the main thing was that it was surrounded by a very high wall, which, of course, also served a purpose. Quivering on the wet wall like a luring mirage and false sign was a little rainbow.

While I was sitting under the bush, the leaves on the trees dried out, the flowers suddenly opened up again and butterflies began flitting between the grass like tiny licking flames. The only evidence left behind by the thunderstorm was a stream in the ditch in front of the house where blades of grass, which had been washed away, broken branches and even little piles of bushes and flowers were floating.

I was just about to crawl out and stretch my numb legs when all of a sudden the gate in the wall creaked open and a shaggy mongrel bounded out, lay down in front of the house, yawned and started lazily scratching the back of its ear with its hind paw. Not long after-

wards the gate opened again and the old woman came out with a tall bearded man who embraced her, leaned over and said something to her. Then he suddenly handed her a basket covered with hazel leaves, and kissed her on the cheek. After she had gone a few yards, he called to her and asked her to bring something or other next time. The old woman nodded and the man suddenly added, "And do come a bit sooner, mum! We'll pick masses of them after this rain!"

I set off home in a foul mood. I felt sorry about the time I had wasted on this perfectly ordinary old woman. I only cheered up slightly when I was nearly home — most likely because it dawned on me that it was better to feel sorry about what had happened than about what hadn't and couldn't possibly have happened!

Up in the Clouds

When I was young I always felt drawn towards eccentric children with wild imaginations who did the most incredible things which a normal person would not even dream of. Some did not dare to be friends with them but I felt drawn to them probably because inside me there was a little devil who was always getting me into mischief and, most likely, because I was too normal to invent anything extraordinary myself.

In our form there were three eccentrics—as far as I could make out, of course. A lot of us considered there were many more, and one boy even thought everyone was except him but then he was the oddest of us all. His name was Vadim Mejuyev. A tall untidy-looking boy with large frightened eyes, he waddled like a duck and was always covered in ink blotches. His laces were always untied and his wiry hair stuck out in all directions. For some reason or other he wore his cap back to front and used to bend down in such a way that his satchel flew over his head.

As far as marks went, Mejuyev was one of the top of

the form. Every morning he used to poke his head round the classroom door and announce, "Here comes the dirty old bully, Vadim Mejuyev!", vanish and then suddenly come back in, adding quietly, "And here's me!"

He was very hot-tempered and impatient and always rather tense. You felt that if you touched him, he would blow up. When he spoke, he shook his head, waved his fists about and beat his chest. And if anyone contradicted him, he flew off the handle and began threatening to blow everyone to smithereens. At moments like these he always shouted, "I'm gonna thump you so hard you'll turn three somersaults in the air!" or "I'm gonna smash you to pulp!"

He was always terrorising everyone with his shouts and threats but never actually carried them out.

He had lots of eccentricities. During a lesson he sometimes stood up, left the room and sat down at a desk in a higher form. During the breaks he got up to all sorts of tricks, depending on his mood, and as it kept changing, he sometimes rushed about like a mad thing, knocking everyone out of his way, and sometimes opened a window and gave various advice to passers-by, and at others dived into a corner and started sulking. When the bell rang, everyone used to wait in horror to see what else he would think up.

Mejuyev always imagined everyone wanted to offend him and he was constantly drawing up lists of people who had to be beaten up. After lessons he would stand up straight, made attacks, rant and rage and beat up invisible enemies. On account of his eccentricities, Mejuyev was given various nicknames such as "Volcano", "Hot-Head" and "Screwy", which put him completely beside himself. Nature had endowed him with a choleric, ambitious and vain temperament but had obviously forgotten to give him a sense of humour. Otherwise, he would have seen the funny side of his nicknames and not been offended by them.

And then there was Volodya Sosin, a fat boy with a round ruddy face and an incongruously long, pointed nose. Sosin was nervous and short-tempered, and de-

spite his stoutness, incredibly agile. He used to run up and touch the classroom wall really high up and nimbly jump over walls on the way to school. For some reason or other, instead of walking along the road, he always used to go through the courtyards and hedges.

He came from another town and appeared in class towards the end of the school year. As soon as he walked into the classroom, everyone started giggling and thinking up a nickname for him but forestalling us all, he announced, "Look what a barrel I am! A scarecrow! An ogre! I'm going to be the fattest boy in the school! Ha, ha, ha!"

We all started smiling confusedly because we were used to poking fun at each other but never at ourselves! Yes, this was something quite new to us.

Sosin was always trying to make us laugh. Even when he did not have a new funny story to tell, he would puff himself out as much as he could and think up some joke or other. For instance, he would walk up to someone and suddenly whisper, "Only a fool walks across slippery stones, right?" Then, without waiting for a reply, he would take to his heels and if you caught him up and said. "Stop playing the fool! Have you just dropped out of the sky or something?", he would frown and say with a sigh, "Go away! I'm in a good mood now. Don't spoil it!"

While poking fun at everyone else, he used to completely annihilate himself.

"I'm going to be the fattest man in the world!" he would shout out in the break. "But, you know, before school I was as thin as a rake. It's the lessons that make me fat."

The form would roar with laughter and Sosin would quietly slip away somewhere. One day, however, I rushed after him and found him crying in the basement. From then I realised that self-assertion is not always a sign of self-confidence and strength but sometimes simply a way of defending yourself when you're defenseless.

In our form there were a few other odd characters, including a girl with green eyes who was called a witch

because she used to guess marks. For instance, she used to say something like, "I reckon you'll get six out of ten today," or "I can see you've got three out of ten."

She was boastful and touchy. It now seems to me that the oddest thing about her was that she pretended to be odd whereas, in fact, she was more normal than the rest of us. Most likely, she simply enjoyed pretending to be mysterious.

However, the most interesting member of our form was Tolya Yasinsky, who I always dreamed of sitting next to.

He was tough-looking but very pale, with fair tangled hair and short-sighted eyes. There was always a vague, roving look on his face. Instead of walking down the middle of the classroom, he always walked along the sides of the walls. He never laughed and even when he looked happy, there was still something rather sad about him.

He used to sit at the front desk by the window and gaze pensively somewhere, smiling at his own thoughts. Every time she called him to the blackboard, our teacher had to repeat his surname about five times before he got up.

"Tolya Yasinsky, do wake up," some of us would call out.

"Do come back down to earth!" others would sigh.

And we would laugh and wink at one another. Then Tolya would jump up, fiddle with a button and mutter something.

Knowing how absent-minded he was, Tolya once asked his robust neighbour, Olga, to nudge him when he started day-dreaming but as soon as she did so, he fell flat on the floor. Getting to his feet, he thumped Olga on the back and began angrily telling her off because, you see, he had completely forgotten about their agreement.

He usually spoke in a quiet voice but when he came up to the blackboard, the whole form would fall silent. Everyone would stop what they were doing and listen because he always said such interesting things. He would begin by saying something unexpected like: "I haven't

learnt this from our text-book but I've read about it in other books."

"Well, what can I do with you! Go on, then," the teacher would sigh and lean over her report book.

Yasinsky would then start speaking incoherently about all sorts of things that had nothing to do with the subject. As he broached it, he would get more inspired and without raising his voice, start speaking wonderfully well and very fast as if afraid he would not manage to say everything. His face used to become blotchy as he drew patterns in the air with his hands. The whole form fell under his charm, and he spoke so convincingly that even when he was obviously making something up, we still believed him.

The most inexplicable thing about it all was that at break we used to go out in a trance but apart from a few odd phrases and semi-fantastic descriptions, nobody could remember anything that he had said.

While writing compositions, we all used to peep at our textbooks but Tolya never did. When he was solving a problem, he always deduced some new formulas.

Outside school Tolya was even stranger. For instance, he was always disappearing. The class would go to an exhibition somewhere and Tolya would be wandering along somewhere in the rear and then suddenly vanish. The whole form would start looking for him and then it would turn out that he had spotted a train somewhere and had rushed under a bridge to make wishes.

Tolya loved everything quiet—quiet streets, museums and cemeteries—in fact, everything that made me gloomy. But I still always longed to be friends with him, firstly, because of all his innumerable talents. For instance, he used to call by on an engineering study group when everyone was racking his brains over some problem, go up and have a look and then come out with some marvellous answer which nobody had been expecting. And, most importantly, it was so simple and obvious that everyone marvelled how they had not thought of it at once. And it was always like this. No matter what you were stuck on, he would come up and find

the answer with no trouble at all and then go away smiling.

From the very start Tolya was very reserved in school and had no friends. What I used to do to win his affection! I threw paper darts in class, pulled faces, and drew funny pictures. Everyone would burst out laughing, except Tolya, who would say nothing. But, you see, it was him I did it for. I was always trying to amaze him by doing various tricks and used to tell him about all the unlimited ways of getting into mischief at my home. For days on end I used to hover about right under his nose but he never even noticed me. He only praised me once and, what's more, when I was least expecting it. That day I had dragged some shiny bits of pitch into class. Nobody paid much attention to them except Tolya who was simply delighted by them. You see, he was fond of collecting things and always carried around various plants and beetles in his pockets. The beetles were always crawling out of his pockets and creeping across his shirt and he used to rub the plants in his palms and smell them.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed, bounding up to me that day. "Black mirrors! Where did you get them?"

"I nicked them from a building site," I replied without thinking.

"What?" asked Tolya in surprise, gazing sincerely and uncomprehendingly at me. "You took them without asking?"

I nodded.

"But that's dishonest!"

That did it! I lost my temper and exclaimed. "My, Tolya, you're really bonkers!" and twisting my finger against my temple, stalked off.

Much to my surprise, Tolya went after me, knitting his brow and thinking about something, and then blurted out, "Generally speaking, I'm not right. It's of value to us but means nothing to them, right? Let's go over to my house after school? I've got something interesting to show you."

I was thrilled to bits.

At home Tolya showed me his numerous collections of stones, which seemed perfectly ordinary to me. Then he told me all about their unusual qualities. Some, he said, glowed in the dark, others emitted sounds. I listened to him out of respect. Two hours later, after he had gone through all his stones, he wiped his brow and said, "And now let's go into our shed and have a look at what I've got there."

"Perhaps we could another time?" I quickly asked in a pleading tone.

He gazed innocently at me and said earnestly, "All right, some other time or you won't remember everything. But now have a look at my drawings."

And then he dragged a folder out from under the sofa.

At that time Tolya was already an artist of standing reputation in our school. He always helped decorate the school on every festive occasion. He showed me some illustrations to books he had read, and some pencil sketches of wild animals and drawings of fantastic monsters, old knights, princesses, and various inverted images and even drawings of dreams. I particularly liked his water-colour seascapes of shipwrecks and mermaids with crowns of lilies luring the sailors down to the depths.

While showing his pictures, he went on talking, rolling his eyes to the ceiling, and waving his arms about in front of him. He always felt he had not expressed enough in his drawings and finished them off in the air.

After putting his drawings away, he asked if I liked music and without waiting for a reply, took a long black case down from the cupboard, opened it and beamed at the violin inside. After tuning it, and rubbing its bow with resin for a long time, humming something under his breath as he did so, he closed his eyes and started playing.

First he played something sad, and slowly moved the bow with a faint smile on his lips, swaying in time with the music. Then his smile vanished, and he knitted his brows and quickly ran the fingers of his left hand up and

down the violin neck and desperately jerked his bow. The quiet melody was interrupted by a cascade of loud notes, which he kept forcing out. Flushed with tension, he shook, stood on tiptoe and then bent his knees, and the melody seemed to be spinning madly round like a merry-go-round. Then all of a sudden he ended it on the highest note, and flopped down on the sofa, bathed in perspiration and totally spent. I started asking him what he had been playing but he simply stared at me without hearing anything for he was still completely immersed in the music.

That day marked the beginning of our friendship. Tolya became attached to me for, you see, I was his first and only friend. Before he had only been patted on the back and made fun of but I took what he said seriously.

Tolya was a true friend. When a teacher told me off, he would wince with pain, and when I was praised, he was even more delighted than me and would keep fidgeting in his seat and nudging his huge neighbour and whispering in her ear, "Isn't he brilliant?! He's my friend, you know."

Tolya could not hide his feelings. When I once came to him slightly later than we had arranged, he at once asked anxiously, "What's kept you so long?! I've been waiting for you all evening. I even started thinking something had happened to you." And even began stuttering with emotion.

Vadim Mejuyev once put me down on his black list. I knew his threats never meant anything and so took it all as a joke but when gullible, quiet Tolya heard about it, he flared up and shouted at Vadim, "Cross him off right now or I'll send you packing up there." And he nodded towards the sky.

Oddly enough, the more Tolya showed his affection for me, the more casually I treated him. I was still too young then to appreciate my friends until I lost them. However, I did not lose Tolya thanks to his patience and generosity.

He left our town in the last year of school. On the day

of his departure he came breathlessly running up to me and gave me all his collections and drawings. I accompanied him to the tram and he waved to me from the back window for a long time.

It is only now, many years later, that I realise Tolya was my most loyal and generous friend. He is now a famous stage producer and I am proud that as a little boy I guessed he would turn out to be an extraordinary person. True, I feel rather ashamed that I did not really appreciate his eccentricities for what they were.

The Way to Heaven

We often went fishing in summer. We used to cut across the cemetery to the river, along narrow alleys overgrown with acacia and honeysuckle. In front of the cemetery's entrance cripples and paupers used to stand and beg alms of old women. Rumour had it that some of these paupers were drunkards and others millionaires.

Directly behind the entrance archway was a little church with shiny onion-shaped domes which crows used to circle over like charred scraps of paper. A priest and his wife were usually sitting in front of the church. Dressed in a long cassock, which was dusty at the bottom, the priest had a thin, curly silver beard, close-set eyes and a venomous grin on his lips which I could never fathom out. At one time it seemed to me he imagined he was an omniscient sage but then I realised his mouth quiver because he muttered the same memorised text day in, day out.

The cemetery lay behind the church. The most coveted plots by the church were fairly large—some even the size of a volleyball court. Rising above their railings were crypts, cold marble sculptures, epitaphs and tombstones with photographs, dedications and wreathes of wire flowers. Further away from the church the

enclosed plots grew gradually smaller and on the far edge over the steep river bank, were so tiny that it seemed the deceased had been buried at full height.

Although I often saw funerals, I still had no idea of what the word "death" meant. My life had only just begun and would, it seemed, go on forever. At any rate, I could not believe that I would die one day. As for being killed I could just about imagine that. I would do so in a very heroic manner with people watching. But as for simply dying—not on your life! I was sure I would live forever or, at least, longer than everyone else. And this most likely explains my dare-devil courage at that time. At the drop of a pin I would dive headfirst into an infamiliar whirlpool or climb up our huge birch and swing on its fragile branches. I thought a guardian angel was always hovering over me. Well, and so, of course, the lads in the yard were sure I was a reckless dare-devil. I did not disillusion them because it suited me for them to think that. What's more, I realised I had to keep them enthralled and every now and then with this end in mind did a stunt to get publicity: I would shin up a drain-pipe to the roof of a three-storey house or walk along the eaves of a top storey. My ascents were tremendously enjoyed by passers-by. For, you see, I not only climbed up but also racked my spectators' nerves by pretending to slip and spectacularly hanging still in the air, holding on with only my hands, and then closing my eyes and swinging as if I had lost consciousness. These theatrical scenes had a powerful effect on my audience—I once nearly sent my granny off to the next world with a heart attack.

In order to confirm my reputation as a dare-devil, I announced one day that I was going to walk through the cemetery at night. At that time such an act was tantamount to suicide. All we boys ever talked about was ghosts and dead men wandering through the night.

At midnight my friends accompanied me to the entrance archway, waited until I had reached the church and started running round the cemetery to meet me by the river.

As soon as I entered the alleys, I was plunged into pitch darkness. The air smelled of musty graves. Such a chilly draught was coming from the crosses and marble slabs that I started shivering. For a moment I regretted my escapade but then quickly came to grips with myself and stepped into the darkness. The further I went, the colder and denser the darkness became but, worst of all, the whole of this realm of tombs was immersed in an eery silence. Once in a while, over-ripe clusters of acacia burst here and there and the popping seeds sounded just like voices coming from under the ground. Several times I thought I spotted someone hiding behind the mounds but then, recalling in time I was immortal, calmed down. I was about half-way across the graveyard when all of a sudden I heard a clicking sound drawing nearer. Then I distinctly heard someone breathing heavily and rather hoarsely close-by. My hands started shaking and my legs turned to jelly. Plucking up all my courage, I headed down towards the river. But after running about ten yards, I tripped over a scrap of iron and fell flat. And when I picked myself up, the clicking sound was only a couple of feet away. I froze with fear, covered my face with my hands and waited. I heard someone stomping beside me and felt a breeze on my legs and someone sighing heavily very close by but I dared not open my eyes. And it was only when something hot touched my face that I started back and straight ahead of me caught sight of a horse! It was standing with its forelegs hobbled, swishing its tail.

This episode convinced me once and for all that I was immortal and from then on I did all sorts of stupid things and, most importantly, became terribly lazy, and reckoning I had all the time in the world, did absolutely nothing all day long. One day, however, I at last realised that you could be immortal without living forever and that you could become so through your personal virtues or the works you left behind. This is how it happened.

Uncle Kolya the shoemaker used to sit on the corner of our street. He was fat and had mischievous twinkling

eyes, and coughed a lot because he was a heavy smoker. He was a first-class master and the shoes he repaired always lasted much longer than ones mended in shops. What's more, he did his work wonderfully well and always on time. He was totally honest and spent a long time poring over every pair, soaking them in water so that the leather became soft and supple, choosing scraps of rubber to match the colour of the shoes and making special supports. He put his heart and soul into every pair of boots and shoes as though they were his last chefs d'œuvre. He lived and worked according to some very exacting unwritten rules. True, he charged more than repair shops but, if you ask me, this was only fair. You see, he not only worked for the sake of ideals but also to support a large family. And, besides, good work is worth more than any amount of money.

He used to sit majestically on a stool and without hardly moving at all, work wonders with his hands. When I was standing nearby, he would tell me something or other, and his quiet voice, leisurely way of speaking and everything else about him somehow emanated a kind of warmth, confidence and power. It was so pleasant listening to him. Yes, and not only that: it was pleasant just standing near him! Every morning when I went up to his booth, he nodded and said, "Hello, Alex!"

He never simply said "hello" but always called you by your name. One day he said "hello" and then asked, "What are you so cheerful about today, then?"

"Oh, nothing much. It's just that everyone else's afraid of dying but I'm not a bit."

He smiled, swigged some water from a wicker bottle and then went on banging one nail after another into a shoe. Then he lit up, started coughing, flushed red with the strain and said, "We're all mortal. Sooner or later everything living dies. You have to try and lead a useful life and discover what you're best at, choose the right way in life and work hard. Everyone's capable of doing this. Everyone's good at something although they often don't realise it themselves. But then something or other will turn up to help them or someone good will spot them.

And then the rest is entirely up to them."

"Aren't you afraid of dying, then?" I asked.

"What's there to be afraid of? I, for instance, can pass away peacefully because I've already done some useful things — I've built a house, brought up my kids, given shoes to hundreds of people and planted the poplars in our street." He began laughing and then coughed again and gasped for breath.

After Uncle Kolya died, it took me a long time to believe he was dead. I still thought that, instead of dying, cheerful, kind people stayed on and acted as invisible friends and consciences of the living.

The Best Shade Is in Your Own Back-Yard

As my story draws to a close, I should like to say a few more words about myself. I have already said a great deal and I shall now only describe my virtues and defects in more detail. Generally speaking, I was peaceable but if baited, completely flew off the handle. A fierce glitter would appear in my eyes and I would start panting loudly, puff myself out and fly at my adversary with clenched fists. I often resorted to my fists and not only when I lost my temper but also when I was solving various moot points for, you see, I considered that actions spoke louder than words in an argument. Mind you, I was easily appeased and afterwards suffered pangs of remorse for having lost my self-control. Of course, this did not help the person I had offended, especially as I could not pluck up enough courage to apologise. I wanted to make things up to him but was too ashamed to admit I was in the wrong and so simply went on sulking.

At a very young age, I once took umbrage at my parents for something or other and decided to leave home

on my tricycle. I even persuaded my three-year-old neighbour to run away with me and she, in turn, took along her doll. And so off we set with me on the saddle and the little girl and her doll on the rack behind. But by the time we reached the next street, I had completely forgotten my resentment and already wanted to go home. In order to justify my decision, I told my passenger that there was something wrong with the tricycle and it was about to break down. However, she at once ingeniously suggested that we continued on foot. Then I explained to her that I had something congenitally wrong with my legs and pretended to limp. Then the little girl sighed in dismay and reluctantly traipsed home with me.

Throughout my childhood I suffered from two things: thinness and my pet name "Beanpole". Although I had a huge appetite as a child, I was still terribly skinny. Imagining there must be something drastically wrong with my stomach, mother took me to see doctors but finding nothing, they said I was simply an energetic child. At that time I never sat on crowded beaches but always on my own in a spot where cows with little bells round their necks used to stand in the water. I tried all kinds of ways to fill out. I took up weight-lifting, went to bed and got up at fixed times, and tried to move as little as possible. I battled with my thinness for months until I finally realised I hadn't a cat in hell's chance of winning and should have been born less energetic.

Things were even worse as far as the name "Beanpole" went. It was always getting me down. For instance, I would be playing in the yard and mother would suddenly shout out, "Beanpole! Lunchtime!"

And I would stand there, blushing with shame and anger while the little girls went on leaping about and giggling nearby. It put me completely beside myself. How could I possibly imagine then that twenty years later I would have given a great deal to hear my mother call me that again?

At that time I longed to be tall and broad-shouldered, with a dazzling, winning smile and steely gaze. I imagined being a cowboy, an explorer or a pirates' leader, and al-

ways a lady-killer. In my travels I assigned an important part to romantic adventures, which consisted of kidnapping lady-loves, winning their hearts by heroic exploits, punishing rivals, uttering brilliant monologues and singing to a guitar. However, my main weapon for killing beautiful women on the spot was to be my smile and hypnotic gaze and, of course, my name. You see, I would be called Michael or Robert and not Beanpole or anything like that.

Imagining all this in my mind's eye I often used to travel the world over as the renowned owner not only of incredible fortunes but also of a huge harem. Coming back down to earth, I would splash myself with cold water, lift bricks in the garden and keep playing about with my catapult, just waiting for someone to fire at. I used to swagger down the street like a sailor with my chest stuck out, smiling at everyone, chattering and singing. I think I must have guessed that your mood affects your outward appearance, and was probably convinced that my face had a meaningful expression on it and my gait was that of a confident, successful person. Unfortunately, however, I was the only one to see this and the others did not even guess about it. What's more, almost everyone and, first and foremost, girls saw a completely different expression on my face and always turned away from me.

For a while I went to the opposite extreme and started making myself out to be a know-all. A weary look and knowing ironic smile appeared on my face and whenever I was asked anything, I would purposely keep silent but to no avail, for everyone simply laughed at me and the girls ran away without even turning their heads.

It was only when I grew older that I realised the secret to the success of people like my uncle was to remain true to themselves. As soon as I removed my artificial masks, I at once got on well with everybody and especially with old women because I always knew the latest news and was very talkative. By the way, the old woman with the mushrooms who I once followed eventually became my most receptive listener. I used to spin her incredible yarns,

which took even my breath away but she still went on listening.

Because I always carried my catapult around with me I looked rather like a bloodthirsty hunter but this was not actually so. In my pre-school days I really did shoot birds but as I grew older, I gradually went over to inanimate targets. At about fifteen I became terribly sentimental and disliked picking flowers or catching insects. Nobody took me seriously, mind you. They all considered that even if I was not killing my victims at that particular moment, it did not mean I had given up my wicked ways. My sentimentality was regarded as a sort of passing phase and time for thinking up new ways of using brute force. A fixed opinion had already been formed of me and it was difficult to change. So there was nothing left for me to do but keep up my reputation as a callous boy. In public I put on a brave face and picked flowers and stuffed beetles into match-boxes, but back on my own again, put the flowers into water and set my victims free.

On hot days a gentle lull used to descend over our street and everyone flung their windows and doors open and doused their floors with cold water to keep them cool. The deserted rooms smelled of garden flowers, fruit ripening in the sunny terraces, the stagnant water in the barrels outside, and the resinous firelogs and damp earth under the porch.

I loved lying in the shade of the tall cool grass behind the house, watching cabbage butterflies, dragonflies and bumble-bees hovering about, and listening to someone beating a carpet nearby and to a tram jangling in a neighbouring street.

From my shady spot I could see my mother through the window, cutting up vegetables for a beetroot soup, washing laundry on a wooden board, ironing and singing. No matter what she was doing, she always sang quietly to herself. She worked very hard. She did not know how to relax and even when she had finished everything, she would start rearranging the pots and pans, and washing the dishes all over again. She went to bed later than every

body else and got up first, was always in a good mood and always sang.

Sometimes I thought that when I grew up I would have a vegetable plot and a garden, a carpentry workshop and a wife to look after me. And I intended to live in an attic like my uncle for he was my ideal. I only had to run up to him and suggest we flew kites and he would at once assume a serious air and say, "Say no more! I've got you. Right then! Run and glue some kites together—quick! We'll go and fly kites just as soon as I've finished this painting."

When talking to me, he never squatted on his heels or lisped or spoke ironically, or kept a distance between us like most grown-ups did but always treated me as an equal. And that's why I loved him so.

One day he took me into his garden and entrusted me with a very important job.

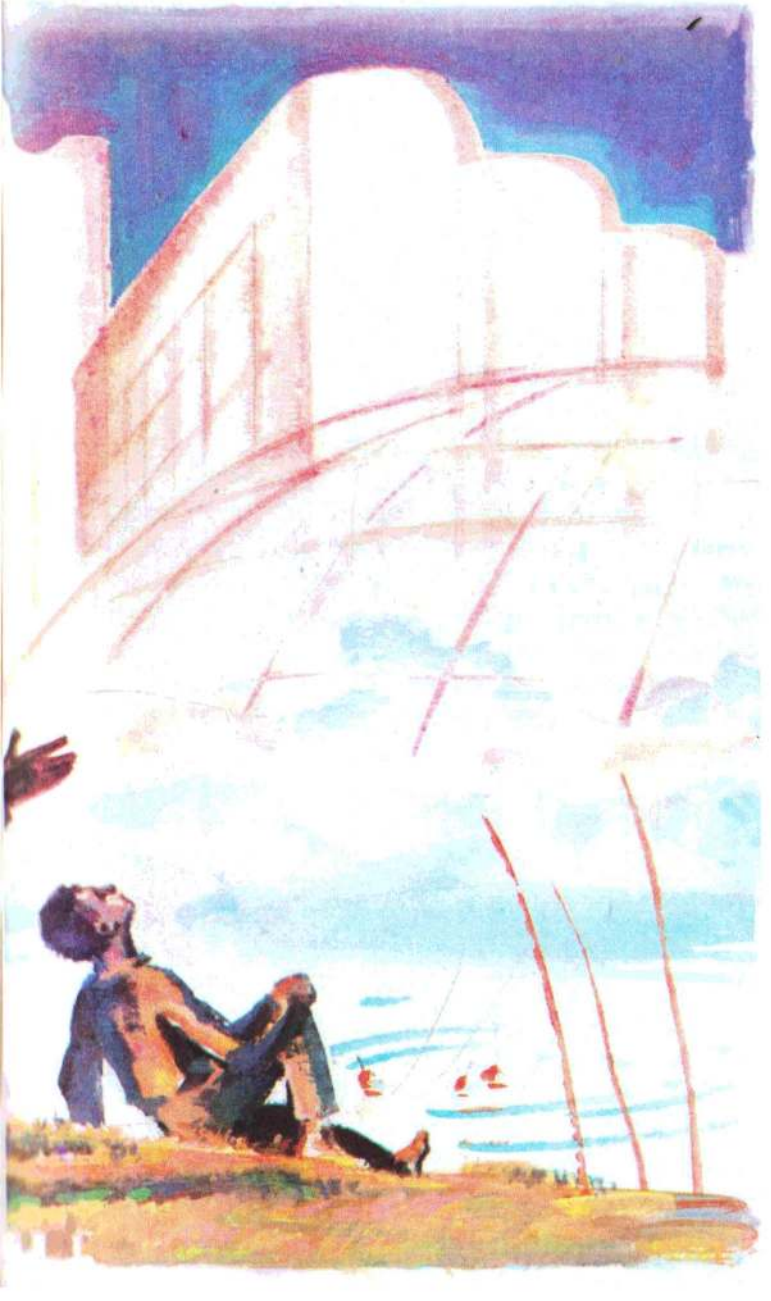
"Come on then, you can prune the trees!" he said. "I think you know how."

Now I ought to mention that tree-pruning isn't at all easy. If you don't know how to, you'd better not try because you could ruin the whole tree. But my uncle was sure I would make a good job of it. After examining the first tree I had pruned, he made a few critical comments but praised me on the whole. And encouraged by his praise, I started pruning each tree better than the last. Recalling this now, I realise that praise is one of the quickest ways of developing good qualities in a person. At any rate, by letting a person think he is better than he actually is, you inspire him with confidence and faith in himself and he then really does become better. And, besides, some words of praise and encouragement you remember for the rest of your life.

My uncle and I often spent Sundays fishing or swam to the islands on the river. We would stretch out on the sand with our arms under our heads, and uncle would always tell me a story. More often than not, he spoke about the beautiful life in the future when there would be spacious glass-panelled houses, wide motorways, huge bridges and ships. He loved everything big and grand for,

to his mind, that was what real life was all about. After talking to my uncle, everything around began to seem small and pitiful. I longed to take off and fly into the beautiful future that uncle used to describe for that's how powerful an impression his dream used to make on me. This great capacity for affecting others with one's mood is, perhaps, the best present one person can give to another. I still cherish these dreams of my uncle's for they are like a little monument to this extraordinary man. As a child, I had a lot of wonderful things: adventure books, a cross-bow, a bicycle, and a pair of binoculars; I loved boating, fishing, football, standing at the back of a tram and watching the rails racing away, wandering along the deserted streets in the mornings. Yes, there's no doubt about it — I loved a lot of things and it's simpler to list the things I didn't like. But I would have given up everything I had and everything I cherished for an hour in my uncle's company. Oddly enough, at seventeen I stopped looking upon my uncle as my ideal and, what's more, even considered him old-fashioned, grumpy and mediocre. And I thought his wide trousers, bombastic, affected way of speaking and pretentious paintings were ridiculous. And his life in an attic in our day and age seemed like stupid exhibitionism. And it was only after I had turned thirty that I looked upon him as an extraordinary person again, and, most importantly, realised that uncle's optimism consisted not only of a cheerful attitude to life but also of joy in overcoming difficulties. He, for instance, would argue thus: "People often say of someone who's achieved something or other that 'he's been lucky' and forget that he didn't lose heart and give up when he wasn't. That's why it's usually the stubborn, persistent types who succeed. Life gives each and everyone sufficient opportunities to take their fate into their own hands but not everyone knows how to make proper use of those opportunities."

At seventeen I noticed many things were wrong around me and sometimes even thought that the whole world needed changing. Of course, I realised it was easier to change everything in theory and that's why I used to sit in the



sunshine behind the shed for days on end, imagining what I would do if I were a magician.

First and foremost, it seemed completely unfair to me that the summer passed so quickly: before I could say Jack Robinson, it was time to go back to school. I decided to increase the number of summer months and reduce the number of winter ones, of course. In fact, I think I made the summer last eleven months and left one month for all the other three seasons for variety's sake.

I also disliked the way people could not find a common language with animals and so immediately introduced a new means of communication between all living creatures, using something in between mimicry and Esperanto.

I also considered it was a grave mistake that evil spirits only existed in books and legends. To my mind, they added an element of fantasy to life and so I gave every household an imp and settled water-sprites and pixies in all the reservoirs and forests. This, it seemed to me, was the best way of protecting people from pernicious complacency and satiety.

It also seemed ridiculous to me that some people were born beautiful and others ugly and that some were immediately well looked after while others were left to the cruel blows of fate. At birth and in early childhood I gave everyone equal opportunities and then it was up to them to use their head and hands to build their lives as best they could.

I wanted wonderful people like my uncle to live forever and all talented people to be given the chance to display their talents, and all lonely souls to acquire friends, and all unhappy people to be happy and many other things besides. At that time there was a great deal I wanted to do but, most of all, change people. With the exception of my uncle and granny, I saw masses of defects in everyone I knew, and was always noticing they did not do things the way I wanted.

Imagining I was a magician, I created an entire inner world and every day soared higher and higher above the earth. Day-dreaming behind the shed was no longer

enough for me and so I started day-dreaming in the street, at home and in school and going to bed earlier so that I could day-dream in bed for a while. What's more, my dreams were sometimes like games of cat-and-mouse: each time I chose one particular branch of the huge tree of my fantasies and tried to seize hold of it all at once, it vanished instantly. So I had to dream carefully and think of the tiniest details and develop them slowly. For several days at a time I would tenderly nurture a branch of my dream and put it away like a finished story somewhere in the recesses of my memory only when a detailed picture had appeared in my mind's eye.

In those days I wasted a lot of time on these futile dreams. I was probably going through a transitional phase in my life for, you see, later I was drawn into the vortex of everyday life and started seeing many things in a new light.

From then on the more mature I became, the less defects I saw in nature and, what was particularly important, no longer wanted to change people. I realised that before changing others you have to change yourself first. In short, I came to the conclusion that I should leave everything as it was and not go against nature.

When I grew up, I came to love our small town even more. It does not usually produce a favourable impression at first for, you see, it cannot boast of asphalt streets, attractive avenues or theatres but, to make up for it, has quiet, clean little lanes and plenty of trees, flowers and grass. Visitors do not linger long in our town for they say it's rather dull but I still love it. Sometimes when nobody's looking (for, you see, I'm not a little boy any more) I climb up the birch and look down on our street and the house opposite where Uncle Fedya still lives only he is now married to our ex-neighbour with the dog.

My uncle left town long ago and nobody knows where he is or what he is doing. He never writes but I'm sure if he knew how much I missed him, he would come back or at least send a message.

Our neighbours, the Kirillins, separated and moved

to different districts but Kirillin still comes over and walks along our street sometimes. "There's nothing I can do about it," he says, "I just feel drawn here, that's all."

Valeri married our princess, Olga, and they now have a large family.

From up in the birch I look down through friends' windows in neighbouring streets, and at my father's compressor factory and at the new Ferris wheel which was recently erected in Gorky Park, and at the stadium's flags... But that's all I can see. To catch a glimpse of the rest, I would have to climb up to the very top but I can't any more...

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